

*DD The DD*  
**LETTER D**



**GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD**



42

Mrs. Israel Dano,  
my always dear Effie, with much love.  
Ever yours lovingly.

Xmas, 1904.





**THE LETTER D**



# THE LETTER D

*By*

Grace Denio Litchfield

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*"In the Crucible," "The Moving Finger Writes"*

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*To*  
*Robert James Hubbard*





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# THE LETTER D

## CHAPTER I

### *THE MANOR*

The end crowns all.

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA.

“SARA, O Sara, such news!” Miss Alicia’s voice quivered.

It was a cold December morning, and Miss Sara Slade was in the handsome Manor library, established, as if for life, in an easy chair of a style and luxuriance to beget indolence in a Flying Mercury. Her ruby gown, rich in fabric and ample of girth, spread itself diffusely around her, gathering in every stray particle of warmth, though no added glow shone on the large-featured, black-browed, passive face with its shade of down on the wide upper lip. She

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made no motion to draw her encroaching draperies from the hearth when the heavy mahogany door behind her slid back to admit her sister from the hall. Nor did she turn her head. It was her way tranquilly to await developments. Troubles are the sooner upon one and pleasures the sooner done with by meeting them half way.

“O Sara!” said her sister again, helplessly.

Little Miss Alicia, as the townspeople had affectionately designated her for upward of fifty-five years, the younger sister being spoken of as Miss Slade, was in a tremor of nervous excitement. The lids fluttered even more than usual over her pretty brown eyes, and there was a pucker of anxiety across her gentle forehead, down either side of which the thin locks, pale gold still, were waved with scrupulous exactness. She came to the fireplace, a dainty, fastidiously dressed, dignified little figure, with a small soft face which had the smoothness of texture and delicacy of colouring of a lady-apple, and draw-

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ing up a narrow stiff-backed chair, she sat down, very straight and tense, and laid an open letter on her sister's knee.

"Read that, dear."

Miss Alicia was accustomed to refer everything to her sister, from the weightiest public question to the smallest domestic detail; and because she did this, she cherished the delusion that she decided nothing of herself. The supposition gave her an incredible amount of help. However, so long as the thing we hold by steadies us in our path, what matter whether it be a staff or a reed?

Miss Sara took up the closely written sheet with a deliberation which seemed a guarantee of wisdom.

"Oliver?" she asked. "In trouble again." This last was an assertion, not an interrogation. A sense of pride in her sister's intuition glimmered through Miss Alicia's distress.

"Yes, yes. Poor fellow!" she breathed softly. Then she steeled herself into becoming severity.

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"This is worse than ever before. Sara, he is ruined, absolutely ruined!"

Miss Sara slowly read the letter through, no muscle of her face changing. As she let it drop into her lap she turned her head ever so slightly to meet her sister's eyes.

"Well?" she asked.

"You see he has paid up every cent," Miss Alicia said hastily. "He owes nobody anything. It is an honourable failure. It is no disgrace to our name—though to be sure it is not exactly our name. If Sister Mary were alive—" Two tears rolled over her soft cheeks.

Miss Sara was staring at her fixedly with big black inscrutable eyes.

"Well?" she asked again.

Miss Alicia hurriedly dried her tears with a tiny embroidered handkerchief.

"I see you feel about it precisely as I do, Sara. It is not a case for our interference, and the offer of that Chicago firm is far better than anything he could get here. It is but fair to



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let him make another new start. Only—there is Constance.”

“Yes,” Miss Sara agreed. “There is Constance.” The deep harsh voice seemed to invest the words with some subtle significance of duty.

Miss Alicia would as soon have thought of evading an obligation as of going into the street without an outdoors garment. She drew a quick breath.

“You mean that we ought to offer her the Manor as a home till her father can make her one better to her liking?”

Miss Sara, by lack of denial, appeared to give assent.

“That is just like your generosity and forbearance,” Miss Alicia continued humbly. “I am afraid I am less forgiving. I have not forgotten how she spoke of the Manor to those people. She called it dull, you know.”

Miss Sara slowly removed her eyes from her sister’s face to the fire, where they rested.

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"The Manor is dull, I suppose," she observed.  
"But dulness is comfort at our age."

Miss Alicia leaned forward and lovingly stroked her sister's hand, lying large and inert on the cushioned arm of her chair.

"How like you, Sara, to remind me that she was very young when she said it. Of course I ought not to lay it up against her after so many years. I daresay it might seem dull even to an older person in comparison with a New York home," she added, with a brave attempt to put justice before loyalty. "But Constance must be twenty-seven now, indeed nearly twenty-eight. Do you think she might regard it differently now? that she might be glad to come to Wendover, to leave her father freer? She is devoted to him, you know, in spite of his bearishness. Poor Oliver, how he has changed! But you see the way he writes of her. He really adores her. So he should. She is all he has. But she is all that is left us, too. And you

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really think, Sara, that we might make the offer?"

In her agitation Miss Alicia had risen to her feet and stood quivering like a blade of grass in the breeze. But Miss Sara did not look up.

"Don't you want Constance to come?" she asked, at last, still staring into the fire with strong wide-open eyes that no flame harmed or dazzled.

Miss Alicia laughed aloud, a pleased little laugh, sweet and guileless.

"O Sara, how clear-sighted you are! How you always do go right to the point! Of course it will be a pleasure—a joy—to us, if it is best for her. She is our niece. We have a right to her. And the house is so big—so empty—with just us two in it." Her voice faltered. "I wish I were as large minded as you. It was foolish to resent that childish speech of hers, and to be afraid to ask her to come. It is easy to see that this is exactly what poor Oliver wants. Do you know, we have done so much for him already in

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so many ways that I came in here resolved to do nothing this time. And, as usual, you have made me see how impossible it would be to do anything but the right and kind thing. O Sara, it will be like letting the sun in all over the house! What room shall we give her, dear? The Blue Room?"

Miss Sara pondered. "Isn't she blonde?" she inquired at last.

"Of course! of course!" exclaimed Miss Alicia delightedly. "The Blue Room certainly. How could I think of any other! And when shall I write, Sara? At once?"

Miss Sara was laboriously lifting her eyes to the clock when it politely struck, and she dropped them again. "It is ten o'clock," she remarked.

Miss Alicia turned toward her desk, which stood, invitingly open, by one of the eastern windows of the great room.

"You wish me to catch the next mail? I will, dear. I will not lose a moment. And I will tell

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Oliver that our asking her was entirely your idea, though of course we both want her. For we do, don't we, Sara? Oh, I never knew till this instant how intolerably I wanted her! Mary's child, Sara, Mary's child! O my dear—" she came and leaned over the back of her sister's chair, and something, half a sob and half a laugh, broke from her. "She is just what we both of us need. How have we ever lived, you and I, how have we ever lived so long without her? Only suppose, dear, that she is not happy with us? that she is bored again?"

"Bored?" repeated Miss Sara in slow surprise. "Now? You forget Geoffrey Doane."

It was such darkly oracular sayings as this that gained Miss Sara her reputation for sibylline wisdom. Miss Alicia's face cleared instantly.

"How clever you are, Sara! So I did. I forgot Geoffrey Doane. Let her come!"

## CHAPTER II

### *RED ROOFS*

. . . bring with thee  
Jest and youthful Jollity,  
\* \* \* \* \*  
Sport that wrinkled Care derides,  
And Laughter holding both his sides.

L'ALLEGRO.

OF Wendover's many happy homes, the happiest was that of the Doanes. It stood half way down the sunny side of Doane Avenue, in the centre of a large square, partly hidden by magnificent old elms, between whose graceful branches its red gables glimmered alluringly. To pass it by unheeding was like turning one's back on a friend. The carriage entrances, wide and gateless, were a standing invitation to drive in, while the house, whose every other window was a door, and whose every door was of double



## RED ROOFS

width, seemed as urgently to request that no one should remain outside.

The builder of Red Roofs had thought only of filling it with air and light. Nothing had been done for show, and little for beauty, but everything for comfort. Wherever the sun fell, there was a window, or a long lazy stretch of veranda. Wherever the winds blew, a roof sloped down protectingly, or a casement had a double sash, or a stout stone wall interposed its shelter like a breastwork, while everywhere among the gables chimneys stood out at random, zealously ensuring summer within even when it was winter without.

If externally all was promise, inside all was fulfilment. There was not a room in either of its rambling storeys but one wanted immediately to live in it. Quite apart from the pictures and bronzes and bibelots of price which lent the house an artistic interest beyond what its exterior implied, it had a distinct atmosphere that took hold of one and possessed one. If people

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have auras, why not also homes? Only to cross the threshold of Red Roofs was instantly to fall under its cheery spell, as if all the joys that had been known there in the past had instilled their subtle aroma into its walls.

Geoffrey Doane had long since recognized this unique charm of his home. It appealed to him anew, however, in the comfortable sub-conscious region of unanalyzed impressions, as he came in out of the cold one gloomy January afternoon. Something indefinably pleasant seemed to rush to meet him, together with soft scents from cut flowers and blossoming plants. Then a peal of laughter, clear and sweet as silver bells, rang out from a room off the hall where the family usually sat—the Racket Room, as Ruth had not inappropriately named it. It was Ruth's laugh, and wherever this most delightful of his four sisters might be, there was invariably an all-pervading and lively sense of being glad that one was born. Geoffrey turned that way.

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In the spacious low-ceilinged room, he found, as he expected, a blaze of lights and sparkle of upleaping flames, the click of delicate china, an inspiring fragrance of tea, and a medley of happy staccato voices. His father, whom he so resembled that the Judge was wont to say he never was sure which was himself, sat before the fire, a shaded lamp at his elbow and the evening paper across his knee, idly smiling at Ruth's sallies. Mrs. Doane, always more like an adored guest than the mistress of the house, was sipping her tea between bursts of appreciative merriment. Laughter was life to her, and fate had been kind, giving her occasion for few tears. Large and shapeless beyond the disguising powers of the best modistes, her broad face, twinkling eyes and unabashed triple chin made her the embodiment of an invincible good nature before which troubles went down like the walls of Jericho before Joshua.

The second daughter, Ruth, a tiny creature who had nothing in common with the large-

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limbed, fair-skinned, grey-eyed Doanes save the rich dark auburn of her hair, was on a stool at her mother's feet, unwinding a skein of blue wool for her eldest sister, while keeping the circle in shouts of laughter. Her pretty third sister, Mollie, was behind the tea-table, equally divided between her relish of Ruth's fun and the attentions of her *fiancé*, a young naval officer lately returned from the Philippines, and Nell, the youngest, seated sideways on the piano stool, every now and then reached back a saucy hand and softly struck an unmistakable chord of Lohengrin's wedding march.

No one at Red Roofs ever went out or in unnoticed, and there was a flutter of welcome as Geoffrey entered. But the tall handsome fellow, with his delightful smile of good comradeship and his winning courtesy, was thoroughly used to being an object of attention everywhere, and had an easy grace and air of joyous assurance, which, stopping short of conceit, sat wondrously well upon him, and helped to impart to others

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that belief in him and in his powers to please which a happy experience had forced upon himself.

He came in, bringing with him the life and tonicity of a mountain breeze, threw a bright word to each, kissed his mother, refilled her cup, passed the tea-cakes, testing them himself approbatively, and finally, relieving Edith of the tangled skein, sat down in her place.

“Well, Ruthie, what is the fun?”

Ruth gave him a wise bird-like look out of her clear, keen, merry brown eyes.

“Oh, just my nonsense. Father has to be amused, or he would be in mischief. Geoff, have you seen her?”

“Whom?”

“My dear boy, is there any one else in Wendo-ver since she came?”

“Oh, Miss Pruyn? Robert saw her a day or two ago.”

“Did he? What did he say? Is she anything like dear little Miss Alicia?”

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“Not a bit.”

“Or Miss Slade?”

“Good heavens, no!”

“Like whom, then?”

“Must she be like anybody? Why can’t she be like herself? She is. I never saw any one so exclusively like herself.”

“You never saw—! Then you have seen her!”

Geoffrey took the ball from Ruth’s hand and flung it at her with a laugh.

“Did I say I had not?”

“When?”

“When I was with Rob.”

“Where?”

“This isn’t Twenty Questions.”

“Where, Geoff? At the Slades’? In the street?”

“Must you have it unabridged? Well, she was at a window doing nothing admirably well, and looking like—Charlotte Corday behind the bars—Hero mourning Leander—anything you



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prefer. Nell, let us have a try at that Schubert thing." And flinging the unfinished skein around Ruth's neck he caught up his violin and began tuning it solicitously.

Nell had scarcely played the first measure of the serenade, when there came an imperious rattat outside a window opening on to the piazza. Geoffrey hurried to fling it back and looked out.

"You, Miss McIntyre?"

"Let me in!" commanded a voice outside, and forthwith a wheel chair containing a little old lady muffled to the chin in a brown fur-lined cloak, was pushed unceremoniously into the room.

"I make no apologies," she said, nodding about her complacently. "I come in where I can, and that is not up your front steps. Here, you Henrietta." She looked over her shoulder at the maid, who, holding demurely by the chair, was sweeping the room with her trained glance as if at an Observation party. "Go home. One of these gentlemen will wheel me back. See that

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Maria has my dinner for the stroke of six and that she puts but one egg to the pudding. Mind now. One. Well, children," she turned to her smiling hosts. "I came for a cup of tea. Many a person besides the Lord 'loveth a cheerful giver,' and this is the only house where I get it anyway decent. Who is that?" She peered at Ward Templeton's unfamiliar face with small inquisitive black eyes, and the presentation over, scrutinized him with redoubtable candour.

"Oh, ho. So this is the lover, is it? You have a horrid trade, young man. Don't bring up your sons to follow it. Soldiers are licensed murderers, and you others are pirates. You ought to sail under a black flag. Undo my cloak, Ruth. Your room is too hot. Can't you open a window?—not on me. I don't want to catch my death of cold. Where is my tea? Give it me fresh. It would spoil your reputation to admit that I had had a cup of flat tea here, and I love you far too well for that." And

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an astonishingly sweet smile suddenly lighted up the shrewd old face.

"But, my dear Miss McIntyre, how dared you venture out in this cold?" inquired Mrs. Doane with concern, as Ruth threw back the cloak, disclosing a scarlet quilted bathgown loosely folded over intricacies of grey worsted. "I thought you fast in bed this noon. What will Dr. Thwaite say?"

"There was a call for dunces when Eli Thwaite took his degree," replied the old lady grimly, as Geoffrey handed her a cup of tea, tactfully interposing himself as a screen between her eyes and the vanishing figures of three of his sisters and Ward, who, shamelessly headed by the Judge, fled the terrible presence in a body. "It is only occasionally that the man has a spasm of common-sense. I have him merely for his own good, that he may talk to a sensible woman now and then. As I have told him, though, I can't afford to throw away money on fools. So if he expects pay for his

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bad advice, he must wait for it till I die, and with coal going up at this rate it is an even chance if by then there is a penny left. Though really, I was near dying this morning. I was far too ill to lie there alone any longer. So I came out to you. Besides, I wanted my tea. It is a waste to make it at home just for one, and waste is a greater robbery than theft. I wanted, too, to hear about Alicia's niece. Have any of you seen her? The minx has not set foot inside my door yet. And I an old friend of her father's!" she added plaintively, looking wistfully round the diminished circle.

"Indeed," replied Mrs. Doane, shaken by inward laughter as Nell joyfully signalled her deliverance from behind the softly closing door. "And so you knew Mr. Pruyn?"

"Knew him! My dear Cornelia, I was Oliver Pruyn's first love," solemnly declared Miss McIntyre, whom a petty regard for accuracy never debarred from making an interesting statement. "I should like to see him again,

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except that meeting old friends after a long separation is like trying on old clothes to see if they fit. And they generally don't. He was something like your Geoffrey here, when I knew him. Oh, he had a way with him!"

"A very taking way it used to be, I understand," Ruth remarked, with her pretty glance of grave omniscience. "According to the gospel of Miss Alicia, at sight of him the morning stars sang together for joy. You must have been a miracle of resolution to withstand him."

There was a right way and a wrong way to talk to Miss McIntyre. Ruth always talked the right way. The visitor shook her short grey curls approvingly.

"It is as well I had nothing to do with him, my dear. Oliver's society manners were all there was to him except his Apollo looks. He was a sort of polite vaudeville of a man, and could entertain you all day long, if that was what you wanted—something like you again there, Geoffrey."

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Geoffrey looked up amiably from a lively little pen-and-ink sketch of her that he was making on a sheet of note-paper. "Pray don't despise social amenities, Miss McIntyre. The courtesies of society are life's small change. They make larger agreements possible."

"But it was precisely in those larger agreements that Oliver failed. The moment it came to work—to business—pouff!" Miss McIntyre blew destruction upon an imaginary soap-bubble. "You can't deceive me, though. I read people's characters like head lines. And I said to old Tom Slade at Oliver's and Mary's betrothal party,—and that, mind you, was the first time I had ever set eyes on Oliver—" (the early-love assertion had unluckily slipped the old lady's memory). "I said to him: 'Tie your girl's property up tight, Tom, or it will develop as many wings as Isaiah's seraphim, and will fly off with the six of them!'"

She paused for some expression of surprise at this acumen, and Mrs. Doane politely volun-

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teered that Mr. Slade must have held her judgment in high esteem ever thereafter.

"He did indeed," Miss McIntyre rejoined emphatically. "Tom was no fool. Another cup of tea, Ruth. And when Mary died and the rich old fellow made his will—why didn't he leave me a slice?—there was his granddaughter's portion so snugly secured that Oliver couldn't touch it as long as she lived. She should be grateful to Tom—or to me—for that foresight. But gratitude is rarely retroactive."

Ruth exchanged one of those telegraphic glances with the others for which every family has its delightful private code.

"I shall call on Miss Pruyne to-morrow," she announced. "I wonder what she is like?"

Miss McIntyre sniffed. "Probably she is one of those blatant society women. By their high-up handshakes shall ye know them. Henrietta, though, says she looks—"

"Henrietta?"

"And why not Henrietta, Missie? Henrietta

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is compounded wholly of eyes and ears. What she doesn't see, she hears, and what she doesn't hear, she sees, and I have to hear a thing or two or I can't get my hair done. She says that Constance Pruyn looks a crowned queen. What are you doing, Geoffrey? Writing an anticipatory sonnet to her eyelashes? 'Tis a pity you weren't born poor, for you certainly have a pretty pen, and starvation in a garret might have been the making of it."

Geoffrey laughingly rose and laid his sketch on Miss McIntyre's lap with one of his charming bows, which seemed always to recognize rank in the person saluted.

"There. You shall have it. See, I have put you on an academical cap, and you are the living image of Richard Wagner."

The old lady bent an instant over the spirited little drawing, coolly critical.

"Why in the world should you want to make me look like that immoral-minded creature with his indecent operas? If Richard Wagner



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looked like me, it is the first good thing I ever heard of him. I should prefer to look like Socrates myself." She flicked the paper unconcernedly off her lap to the floor, and suddenly turning to Geoffrey, met his sunny smile with one almost as beguiling. "You are a good fellow, Geoffrey. All the girls love you, and so do I. Now take me home. Ruth, come round tomorrow and write some notes for me. Why people should expect me to answer my letters, I can't conceive. Don't they know I am ill? Oh, and bring some stamps with you. I haven't one in the house."

## CHAPTER III

### *THE RIVER ROAD*

Produce ! Produce ! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it, in God's name !  
—CARLYLE.

CONSTANCE PRUYN had been for two weeks at Wendover, and not once during that time had more than a perfunctory and fleeting smile lightened the grave beauty of her face. This seriousness was a disappointment to her aunts, particularly to Miss Alicia, who had expected she scarcely knew what demonstrative enthusiasms. When they had last seen her, Constance had been a slim silent girl of fifteen, separated from those of her own age by the singular earnestness of her temperament and the quiet of her bearing. They had set this down to shy-

## THE RIVER ROAD

ness, confidently believing that she would grow up out of it into the vivacity and spontaneity which they had outgrown themselves. Yet Miss Alicia now felt nothing better than a flustered child beside this calm, self-poised, finished woman, with her gracious dignity and her unfathomable reserves.

She was utterly unlike all other young people that they knew—this grown-up niece of theirs—different from themselves, and from her mother, or father, or any remembered ancestor. Evidently she was made to an individual pattern, and just what that pattern was they could not at first determine, beyond recognizing that it was altogether out of the ordinary. Her proud, strong, keenly sensitive face expressed possibilities of feeling equalled only by powers of endurance. The sadness of the nobly modelled mouth with its firmly-closed drooping lips, was both enhanced and contradicted by the eyes. The white lids were those of Michael Angelo's Greek Slave. When they fell, a profound sad-

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ness underlay the repose of her expression. But when she lifted them and her eyes looked out with a direct steadfast gaze from between their heavy fringes of straight lashes, one saw down past their sapphire splendour into infinite depths of peace, and felt strengthened, comforted, inspired, all in one.

Geoffrey Doane and Robert Dunbar, chancing soon after her arrival to see her standing at an upper window of the Manor, had congratulated themselves upon the abstraction of her mood, which had permitted them to slacken their pace and not take their eyes from her as they passed. What had so engrossed her thoughts, Geoffrey still wondered at the fortnight's end, as returning on a bright afternoon from an out-of-town errand, he walked briskly along a country road, the frozen earth, temporarily bare of snow, resounding cheerily beneath his steps. He tried to recall her face more clearly. Its long pure oval had been accentuated by the arrangement of her hair, which rising thickly

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from the low forehead and central part, fell either side in heavy waves half over the ears, and quite covered the back of her head in a loose soft braid. Was it gold hair, or light brown touched with gold? In either case it threw out radiance. The eyebrows were darker than hair or lashes. They were distinctly brown, and strongly and regularly drawn, defining the unusual width of the brows. The nose, like the rest of the features, was large, but straight and finely cut, with generations of culture behind it. The cheeks were clear and pale, almost pallid. There was no lack of colour, however. There could not be with that hair and the blue of those eyes. The head had been thrown back, partly showing the smooth round column of a perfect throat. He could imagine the figure that went with it, tall, yet not too tall, full, yet not too full, stately in carriage, calm of gesture, serene of gait. His thoughts returned to the expression of her face and dwelt upon it. Why was she so sad?

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In his preoccupation Geoffrey failed for some time to take note of the sounds behind him—crunching wheels and jerky hoof-beats, now falling into an impatient trot, now breaking into short fierce gallops. At last they caught his attention, and turning, he looked sharply up the road, then flung himself forward, and catching the bridle of a big bay horse as it was swerving by him, forced it after a moment's contest to a snorting standstill.

The occupant of the phaeton, relaxing the reins, sank back against the cushions with a sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank you! I could not have managed him much longer. He was getting away from me again.”

Geoffrey had not thought what her voice should be, but instantly he realized that it could have been nothing less deep and full and rich than this. It struck a pleasurable sensation all through him, like the echo of a responding chord.

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He had taken off his hat, and stood holding the bridle and smiling at her frankly, the sun burnishing his thick hair to copper, and outlining his figure superbly against the long white stretch of the road.

"Again?" he asked. "You mean that this brute has already run with you?"

"Yes. All I could do was to keep him in the middle of the road and let him go. I have no idea where he has brought me. Could you tell me? Am I far from Wendover?"

"You are about four miles from the Manor. Excuse me, Miss Pruyn. I recognize not only you but Rolf. I am Geoffrey Doane—Judge Doane's son—and with your permission I will see that you reach home alive."

Constance looked dubiously down the unfamiliar way. Her perplexed silence seemed a sufficient consent, and gathering the reins from her hand, Geoffrey sprang into the phaeton, rearranged the disordered rug and was off in a twinkling, Rolf at once setting soberly to work

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in a way that showed his consciousness of the master touch on his mouth.

"This is very unconventional, I fear," Constance said. "But, indeed, Mr. Doane, I cannot help accepting your kindness. My strength has given out."

"I am not surprised," Geoffrey returned. "This is the hardest bitted brute in the Slades' stables. I wonder you were allowed out with him."

"I was not precisely allowed. A whim came over me this afternoon to get off by myself—quite alone—and I slipped into the stables and coaxed Patrick to let me have Rolf, the animal looked so strong, as if he could go so fast and so far. I have driven before. I thought I could hold him."

Geoffrey glanced at her gloved hands. In spite of their slenderness and the delicacy of their tapering fingers, he felt sure that they had a firmness and certainty of touch unlike any other small feminine hands that he knew.



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"Were you already tired of Wendover that you wished to get so far off?" he asked. Yes, the hair under the broad picture hat was brown, interwoven with gold threads like an Eastern tissue. No, it was pure gold. How it gleamed!

"I only wanted to get away from myself, I am afraid," Constance answered. "I was out of tune. I needed to readjust myself."

The blue of her eyes was like the ocean in winter; like a summer midnight; like the sky after a storm. Geoffrey threw up his head brightly.

"This is just the day to harmonize dissonances. I defy it not to modulate any mood from the minor key into the major. I have walked seven miles since luncheon, and I should like to walk twice as many more. Have you seen the River Road yet? May I take you home that way? It is scarcely farther."

Not waiting her permission, he turned at once into a narrow cross lane on the right. Constance gave an exclamation of pleasure as they

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came out upon the Tioga, and followed the river's winding length along the top of a bluff under a double row of maples whose bare boughs were like filigree silver against the sky. The day was superb, the view over the low-lying river and the broken range of blue hills beyond was beautiful, and Geoffrey's joyousness was contagious. Constance felt it like an enveloping atmosphere, and yielded to it as to the warmth of the sun. He talked brightly upon a score of subjects, his words flashing over the surface of things as a bird's wings skim over deep waters, and more and more the charm of the man impressed itself upon her as she listened. For each person that they met he had a sunny glance of recognition or a cheery greeting, and every face brightened at his approach. Once he sprang impulsively from the phaeton, reins in hand, to pick up a dropped whip for an old farmer lumbering by on his high-seated cart. Another time he stood up in his seat to toss some small silver to two barefooted urchins who had

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clambered upon a fence to see him pass. Constance demurred at this.

"The boys did not ask for money. Why should you make beggars of them?" she objected.

Geoffrey looked at her with some surprise as he carefully straightened the rug over her.

"Beggars? It is alms that pauperize, not gifts. The little chaps are friends of mine. I like to give them a trifle now and then. Boys like tips."

"You use the term 'friend' rather vaguely, do you not? Or do you really make friends so easily?"

"Oh, in a general sense I could love all God's world," Geoffrey answered lightly enough, yet with a certain earnestness, too. "When it comes to friends, though, friends in Emerson's or Thoreau's sense I mean, I could have but two—one man and one woman."

"Have you found the man yet?"

Geoffrey drew the reins thoughtfully between

## THE LETTER D

his fingers. "I suppose I am said to be hand in glove with all my contemporaries. But in point of fact just one out of the lot is my Damon. He is my law partner. You would like him."

"How do you know that I would? I am bigotted in my likings. I like very few."

"I know that, too," Geoffrey rejoined confidently. "Your liking is a patent of nobility. You reserve it for the elect. But Dunbar—yes, you could not help liking Robert Dunbar. We are the antithesis of each other, he and I. I often wonder how we came to be pals."

"Probably your differences are complementary."

"Decidedly they are. But Dunbar does not take in the differences. Practically he fancies that I am what he is, and that he is what I am. We jog on very comfortably, however, on that misunderstanding, though I am chiefly body with a mere modicum of mind, and he is all brains with only body enough for ballast."

## THE RIVER ROAD

"I am sure you do your own mental equipment injustice," Constance said. She turned as she spoke, looking full at him, and the blood leaped up in him, and then quieted down as if under a soothing magnetic touch. "I heard you discussed the other day with great finality by an acquaintance of yours—quite a dreadful person, by the way."

"Miss McIntyre by the token," Geoffrey laughed. "She certainly is an outrageous old party, and not unimpeachable as to veracity. Still, one fault often hides many virtues. She has her points, and she is as good as a play. She is our perennial proscenium box."

"You seem to stand well in her good graces, if she can be said to have any," Constance continued. "She declared your worst fault to be your dilettanteism. I gathered that you play two or three instruments, write stories to demand, and paint in water-colours or oils as you please."

"Indifferently, you mean, not as I please,"

## THE LETTER D

put in Geoffrey quickly. "Whatever I do, I do indifferently."

"But is it true? Are you so versatile in your talents?"

"Don't call them talents, please. They would not recognize themselves."

Constance was still looking at him quietly, and the beauty that he saw was no longer that of her face, but of her soul. She was very serious, very earnest, very true, and she was thinking only of him. There was not a particle of self-consciousness about her.

"Why do you spend yourself in such a variety of directions?" she asked. "Would you not accomplish more by concentrating your talents into one line?"

"Must all be specialists?"

"In art, surely. Art is exclusive."

"But my gifts are surface gifts. Spread out, they go farther."

"Oh, if that is all you care for art,—only for its effect, its show—"

## THE RIVER ROAD

"How can I help myself?" Geoffrey broke out. "I can do only what I can. No amount of specialization—of concentration—will convert taste into talent."

Constance withdrew her gaze. Geoffrey felt it like a personal loss.

"If I had your facility of execution," she said slowly, "I would not rest till I had accomplished something—something worth while—something that I as well as my friends could be proud of."

Her face had kindled. As she turned it toward him again, the look on it was an inspiration.

"But if I have nothing, no material, only a knack of handling tools?" he asked.

"How can you be sure there are no materials?"

"I have searched—even to my top shelves. Tools in plenty; but nothing to work on."

"No! no!" her voice was almost impatient. "There must be materials where there are tools."

## THE LETTER D

But you are dividing your forces. You are dissipating your energies—diverting them. Who can go far, working in a circle? Push yourself along a single line if you would advance. Shut out everything but the one thing. Aim steadily at the one point. That is the great thing—to have but one goal, and to make everything bend to the winning of it. Oh, if you knew—”

She turned away, and a pause followed, which Geoffrey did not try to break. When she resumed, there was a quiver of deep feeling in her voice. “I hate to see any one throw away his opportunity. Every one has his chance—once, when he is young. When he is old, it is too late. It is a sin for any man to be satisfied to make less than he can out of himself—a sin to accept mediocrity—to accept failure—if he could have had success. Ambition is a duty.”

Geoffrey felt that she was thinking of her father, and that words might hurt her. He made no reply, and in a few moments more they



## THE RIVER ROAD

had reached the Manor. Unwillingly he drew up before the gate, from which a divided flight of broad stone steps mounted the terrace to the many columned doorway of the old colonial mansion. Tossing the reins to a stable boy on the watch for the phaeton's return, he assisted Constance to alight, and, still in silence, opened the gate for her to pass.

"You will let me call? I must!" he said then hurriedly, half in entreaty, half in command.

Constance extended her hand. Geoffrey held it a second. How long ago was it that he had wondered if it would not be just so firm and sure of touch as this?—an hour?—a day?—a lifetime?

"You must surely come that I may thank you again for your knight errantry. But for you Rolf might have carried me to the world's end," she answered, with that look on her face that was less and yet so much more than a smile.

Geoffrey waited with bared head till she had entered the house, standing so half a minute

## THE LETTER D

more after the great door had closed upon her. Then he wheeled about and walked swiftly back to his office through the cold, clear, radiant afternoon. "I have seen my Holy Grail! I have seen my Holy Grail!" he repeated to himself exultingly as he went.

## CHAPTER IV

### WENDOVER

Love took up the glass of Time, and turned it in his  
glowing hands ;

Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.

TENNYSON.

WENDOVER was a small inland city, not too remote from the great centres to be out of touch with their larger interests, yet far enough away to be wholesomely free from suburban limitations and able to live its prosperous contented life in unembarrassed freedom. The most of its modest ambitions it realized within its narrow radius, unhampered by the attempt to live up to any other standards than its comfortable and indigenous own. And as there is nothing so exhausting as endeavouring to adjust one's liv-

## THE LETTER D

ing to other people's requirements, it was perhaps the lack of this mental strain which gave Wendover its peculiar charm of restfulness.

Nature had provided for an East End and a West End. The beautiful little river Tioga, too shallow for commerce, designed by her in a moment's indulgence solely for ornamental purposes, ran rippling and sparkling across the city in a wayward zigzag, dividing it in two. On one side of this inconsequent, merry interloper, crossed by a matter-of-fact bridge that looked down with disdain on the frivolity it spanned, were the manufactories and railway stations, as well as the shops and offices of the town, the dwellings lying on the upper bank of the river. This residential half, untrammelled by any law of conveniency or purpose, rambled aimlessly about as the fancy took it. Here it compressed itself into narrow winding streets, with neat little houses sitting sociably on the curbstones ready for a chat whenever the day's desultory work was done. There it spread out

## WENDOVER

incontinently into broad fine avenues, lined with overarching elms that gave them the look of cathedral aisles, on either side of which wide-balconied mansions lay at leisurely intervals, each with independent grounds more or less extensive according to the taste or the purse of its owner, and few having any more pronounced advantage over their neighbours.

Indeed, all glaring extremes were absent from Wendover. Its boundaries enclosed little if any desolating misery or appalling luxury. Its actual poor numbered only enough to keep the benevolent instincts of its inhabitants healthfully exercised, and none of its well-endowed, well-ordered philanthropic institutions was in danger of over-crowding. All these blessings considered, it was inevitable that Wendover should be a gay little place. Entertainment was easy, being practised on a comparatively simple scale, and hospitality and good-cheer were dear to its pleasure-loving, generous-souled inhabitants, so that festivity suc-

## THE LETTER D

ceeded festivity all the year round, as naturally as one fruit follows upon another.

Constance might have been a great comfort socially to Miss Alicia, whose assimilative conscience included the acceptance of invitations among the duties for which one should go to the stake. But although she neglected no other opportunity of pleasing her aunts, never forgetting the combined obligations of relationship and capability, and though she punctiliously returned her calls, soon becoming known in all the homes where the Slades visited, she was not to be induced to participate in the winter's gaieties.

"Please do not ask me to go, dear Aunt Alicia," she said, in reply to her aunt's gentle remonstrances. "I infinitely prefer staying at home with Aunt Sara and a book."

Miss Alicia cast an indulgent glance toward the renegade sister who had long since elected the so much easier part of armchair and fireside.

"Of course it is pleasanter to stay at home

## WENDOVER

with Sara," she agreed pathetically. "But the question is not one of pleasantness, but of duty."

"Why is it any question of duty?" Constance asked in surprise. "I do not see any ethics about it. Not wanting to do a thing does not constitute it a duty, does it?"

But this was so perplexing a view to Miss Alicia that Constance chose another line of argument. "I have never cared for entertainments. As soon as I grew old enough to choose my life I gave them up. Not that I am a recluse. I like nothing better than meeting people. But balls—dances—crowded receptions—don't you think that is society's unsatisfying side? Why not avoid it where one can?"

Miss Sara slowly nodded, but Miss Alicia shook her head doubtfully.

"My dear, your position. You cannot act like a nobody. Your position entails certain social sacrifices."

Constance flushed painfully.

## THE LETTER D

“My position?—the daughter of a moneyless man?”

“Constance! Child!”

“Forgive me!” Constance instantly entreated. “Of course I should not forget that I am also your niece.”

Miss Alicia drew up her head with becoming dignity.

“Not only our niece, dear, but an heiress in your own right.”

“In my own right?” queried Constance bitterly. “What right have I over my fortune so long as I may dispose only of its income? To be rich, and he poor,—to have so much, yet be able to give him only a part, only such sums from time to time as it hurts to offer—hurts to accept—is that to hold property in one’s own right? Of course grandfather meant it for the best. But—if he had only known—had only understood—”

The rare tears came to her eyes. She broke off, controlling herself with an effort, and going



## WENDOVER

up to Miss Alicia, who sat looking at her in distressed helplessness, she kissed first her soft cheek and then Miss Sara's, mutely beseeching pardon for her outburst, and silently gathering up her work, left the room.

Miss Alicia turned sorrowfully to her sister.

"I did not realize that the poor girl felt it so keenly. What can we do, Sara?"

Miss Sara continuing to stare into her lap with the same passively pleased expression with which she had received her niece's caress, Miss Alicia, after a moment's pause, sighed again.

"You are right. Of course we can do nothing. Poor Constance! To have had her father set aside so completely—it is hard. Oliver is not bad. Not at all. He is only unlucky. Still—ah, if Mary had never married, how much she would have been spared!"

There Miss Sara slowly and solemnly raised her eyes.

"Then there would have been no Constance,"

## THE LETTER D

she logically inferred. "I am glad that Mary married."

And in spite of the selfishness of this point of view, Miss Alicia heartily acquiesced in it. "Good has certainly come out of evil—for us," she agreed. "Only," she added irrelevantly, reverting with feminine persistence to the unconceded point, "I wish she would go into society."

And as if he had entered into a conspiracy with Miss Alicia, Geoffrey Doane, now a constant visitor at the Manor, introduced the subject afresh that evening.

"Why will you not go out?" he said to Constance. "You really should. Our society is unlike any that you have known."

Constance was bending over her embroidery. Her needle was to her what the brush is to an artist, and the beauty and originality of her work was a never failing source of delight to her aunts, stirring even Miss Sara to approximative sounds of admiration. It was like watch-

## WENDOVER

ing real flowers grow, Miss Alicia often tritely remarked. But to watch Constance at work was a greater pleasure still. Her head bent low, her white lids dropped, her grave face lighted with interest as her slim fingers moved caressingly among her silks, she might have posed for a saint at her devotions. Geoffrey was almost sorry when she lifted her head at his words.

"How is it different? Are not society people the same the world over?"

Geoffrey leaned forward to toy with the ends of her coloured skeins.

"What makes it different is that we all know each other here. We know each other's genealogies, too, as accurately as if we were biographical dictionaries. So we do not meet to get acquainted, as in other places, but to enjoy being together."

"I should fear it would be hopelessly dull to know everybody intimately," Constance commented. "You can no longer have any surprises for each other. Does not society lose

## THE LETTER D

savour when every one is an old story to every one else? You must sometimes be tempted to desert your set for even a less charming one, if only for the stimulus of meeting strangers."

"Desert my set?—when we have but one in Wendover?" cried Geoffrey, with dancing eyes. "My dear Miss Pruyn, have we not been explained to you yet?" He glanced playfully toward Miss Alicia, who smiled leniently at him across the backgammon board while waiting for Miss Sara to resolve upon a throw. "It is quite simple. Wendover society comprises the entire congregation of All Saints, with the exception of the sexton, all the worshippers at Westminster counting down to the fourth row of pillars, and all down to the third row at Emmanuel. And it includes none who attend at St. Bridget's. Is not that a perfectly natural self-suggested classification which should offend nobody?"

"But those outside of this magic circle?" Constance asked in some amusement.

## WENDOVER

"Oh, they belong to no geometric division. They simply go unclassified like uncollected material. Is it not delightfully apparent?" He bent nearer. "Can't I tempt you? Won't you change your mind? Won't you go out?—just a little?"

"Why should I? What should I gain?"

"You? Nothing. I—everything!"

She let her work fall, lifting her grave steadfast eyes in surprise at his sudden earnestness.

"But how, if you please?"

"Then I could see you oftener. I can't call every evening. You would cry a halt. Besides," he lowered his voice, although as he spoke Miss Alicia left the room on an errand, and Miss Sara sat just too far off to catch his words, "I never have you to myself here. Won't you come to the Assembly to-morrow night? There is going to be a crowd, and a crowd is always a chaperoned solitude. It affords endless opportunities. I might get a word with you there."

## THE LETTER D

The corners of her mouth curved faintly upward.

"What do you need of opportunity? Do you not always make it?"

He laughed out brightly.

"Yes, fate is gracious to me. I generally do what I like. I generally get what I want most."

She looked at him with that deep seriousness of hers which drew him as by a magnet.

"It is no credit to you that you are so gay-hearted. You are merely a lark, born to fly in the light and sing."

His voice dropped lower as he answered her.

"Now—since you came—all is light; all is song. There is nothing else in the world. Every moment is a rapture, if only because I can think of you in it."

There Miss Alicia returned, and Constance did not have to reply. She did not even lift her eyes, but sat a little stiller than before, her perfect hands folded upon her work, and the same curiously sad expression on her beautiful face

## WENDOVER

that always came when she looked down. Yet as Geoffrey spoke, something stirred within her, and she held her breath in startled recognition.

From the first Geoffrey had made no secret of his feeling. All in a moment she had inspired in him so intense and overwhelming a love that it was impossible to deny it the outlet of expression. To restrain it, to conceal it, he would have had to cease to breathe. He did not ask what she felt in return. In the wonderful tumult of emotion that possessed him, he was conscious of nothing outside it. He was intoxicated with the mere joy of loving, and for the time being demanded no more than to give himself up completely to its enchantment.

His buoyant joyous temperament had an irresistible attraction for Constance, contrasting with her own nature as sunlight contrasts with twilight. He compelled her out of her indifference. Seen through his eyes the world looked less strenuous, less difficult, more respon-

## THE LETTER D

sive. She felt envired by a hitherto unknown atmosphere. His frank gaiety roused and stimulated her. His insouciance and thoughtlessness appealed to her inexpressibly, like the faults of a lovable irresponsible child. He was three or four years her senior, but the youth in him was eternal, and had youth's eternal charm. It was infectious, too, as were his light-heartedness and laughter. She felt herself growing younger and gayer, as if at his will life were moving back to an outgrown time of enthusiasm. And though she struggled against the spell, rebelling at any influence that made her less wholly mistress of herself, she was forced in the end to admit the impossibility of withstanding his sunny magnetism, or of refusing to join with fate in giving him his way, if only for the reason that it was easier to say yes than no to any favour that he asked.

Scarcely to her own surprise, therefore, on the next evening Constance found herself entering the Assembly ballroom, chaperoned by a



## WENDOVER

lively old bachelor and delighted little Miss Alicia, who could hardly refrain from calling public attention to her niece's presence. Constance moved along beside her with the slow noble grace attendant upon her every movement. She was all in white, without jewel or flower. Her bare neck and arms gleamed dazingly under the brilliant lights, her eyes were sapphires, her hair was a glory, her white feather fan was a sceptre, and something intangibly fine irradiated her whole personality, marking it out as the inevitably harmonious manifestation of a yet more beautiful soul.

Robert Dunbar turned quickly at sight of her.

"That face again!" he said under his breath.  
"What a vision!"

Ruth stood near, chatting with a group of young people, and tossing a merry word to him every now and then over her shoulder, as he hovered uncomfortably in her neighbourhood. She looked round, overhearing, and he gave her

## THE LETTER D

the confiding glance of a friend certain of sympathy.

"Isn't she divine? She was glorious before. But to-night—in that gown— It was worth coming just to see her in it."

Ruth's manner altered ever so slightly.

"Let me introduce you," she said carelessly. "It is time you met her."

The inflexion of her tone escaped Robert. He was not accustomed to expect changes in Ruth.

"No thank you," he answered dreamily. "Not now. I want a good look at her unobserved. It is a face to study."

Ruth gave herself a mental shake.

"Very well, then, whenever you are ready," she returned, in her usual pleasant voice, and accepting the arm of an immaculate youth so devoid of individuality that he seemed a mere sample edition of a dancer, she was whirled away into the crowd.

Geoffrey was in another part of the great

## WENDOVER

hall, bending over his mother's seat to whisper laughingly that she was the handsomest dowager present, when as if an electric current had passed through him he suddenly straightened himself up, and wheeling about abruptly, looked directly across the room at Constance. A wave of scarlet swept over his face, and with a gesture relegating his mother to the care of her neighbours, he hurried to Constance as if in obedience to a call.

He could scarcely speak as he bowed before her. The happiness of the unexpected meeting choked him. Miss Alicia, but a step away, was anxiously entertaining her frivolous escort with carefully selected nothings. Everybody near was talking. But the music drowned all voices, and the couples gliding past in the dance were a moving wall that shut out observation. The solitude of the crowd was about them.

Constance, graciously serene, looked into Geoffrey's radiant face, and a magnetic flood seemed suddenly to engulf her, compelling her

## THE LETTER D

toward him. She drew back, unconsciously resisting.

"Can you guess why I have come to-night?" she asked.

"Because I wished it," Geoffrey murmured boldly, finding his voice. "Because I had to see you once, dressed like this, looking as you do, to know how beautiful you are."

She lifted her fan with a slight interrupting gesture.

"You cannot guess my reason. I will tell you frankly. I came because I wished to see you with others—as you appear when away from me. I have never seen you so. I have seen you only close at hand. You are to leave me now—to dance and talk and act as if I were not here. Do you understand?"

Geoffrey looked at her in speechless astonishment.

"Yes, I mean it," she said, involuntarily moving nearer. "Do you think it a strange whim? You should feel it a compliment."

## WENDOVER

Geoffrey made a hopeless gesture.

"Go now," she said with quiet imperiousness.

"I do not dance, you know. I am to be only a looker-on."

"But I do not want to dance," Geoffrey broke out. "I want only to be with you."

"No, this is too near a focus. I wish to get you into perspective,—to know you in your right proportions. Don't you understand?"

"I do not understand at all," Geoffrey said blankly. "How can I go to any one else, you being here? You give reasons that mean nothing. You came because I asked you to. But I thought when I saw you that you came to give me pleasure."

"I came partly because you wished it," Constance acknowledged. "But mostly I came for this other reason. I know you only in relation to myself. I want to know you on other sides, not on one side only. But what does it matter whether you understand or not? Will you not gratify me so far as to forget that I am here,

## THE LETTER D

and to be just yourself, as you are when away from me? I have granted you a favour. Grant me this."

Geoffrey waited a moment, looking at her intently. Then he replied quite quietly. "I am never truly away from you. You know that, too. I never shall be 'just myself' again. But I can leave you—if that is your wish. For the entire evening, though? May I not, at least, take you in to supper?"

With his eyes upon her, she could not have said no.

"Yes," she answered. "Now leave me—please."

The last word, low and almost reluctantly spoken, confessed her a petitioner upon his will. Geoffrey's face brightened. He bowed low, and with another worshipping look at her, careless who saw it, he turned and walked away.

## CHAPTER V

### *SIDE-ISSUES*

Come, give us a taste of your quality.

HAMLET.

LATER in the evening, tired of waltzing, Ruth sat down, apart from the crowd, in a raised alcove, where, perched in a great armchair, her head a little to one side and her bright eyes full of saucy wisdom, she looked like a bird poised for flight. Robert Dunbar instantly joined her, and dismissing a would-be partner for the next quadrille, she turned to him with laughing camaraderie.

“Confess,” she said roguishly, smoothing down her fluffy blue gown. “Have you done a mortal thing this evening through but watch her?”

## THE LETTER D

“Not much else,” Robert answered frankly, seating himself in unconventional comfort on the edge of the platform, his back propped against a vine-wreathed column, and his carelessly fitting coat hunched up across his shoulders in a way that sent a little quiver of fun through Ruth’s eyes. “As you know, I am not a dancing bear, and Miss Pruyn repays study. I have had a lot out of it. She has a remarkable face.”

Ruth drew up her tiny figure, slender as that of a child save for her charmingly rounded throat and arms, and peered across at Constance, stretching up her thin dark face to see better.

“An unusual profile, and a cold one,” she commented, bringing her eyes back to Robert, and wondering if he were aware of the vagaries of his cravat.

But Robert took as little thought at all times of his apparel, save for its spotlessness, as do the lilies of the field, though not with the same



## SIDE-ISSUES

royal result, while he completely forgot himself and his belongings in any subject that interested him. He was a small, black-haired, black-moustached, nervous-mannered fellow of eight and twenty, with an admirably shaped if disproportionately large head, already a trifle bald, a noble contour of forehead and jaw, and a look of keen intelligence which flashed every now and then startingly over his sensitive and rather dreamy face. His eyes, lustrous and extraordinarily intuitive, were now bent on Constance.

“Cold?” he said, pursing up his mouth with its noticeably short upper lip as he weighed Ruth’s word. “To the majority, perhaps. She holds herself always in reserve. But to the one or two— She could love intensely—distractingly. She is a singular mixture of feeling and mind.”

Ruth’s eyes were on the crazy cravat. Did ever any man more need a mother, or at least a sister! “And what besides?” she asked. “Go on. You have a divining rod for character.”

## THE LETTER D

Robert settled himself still more unconventionally against the pillar, raising one of his knees to clasp his hands about it. It was delightful to be with Ruth. He could think aloud to her, and her clear incisive tones made everything that she said sound interesting.

"Well," he continued slowly, "she influences people tremendously. She dominates. I don't know that she means to—that she consciously sets herself about it. But she can't help it—she is so strong, so self-controlled. She has no end of will. One feels her. Even from this distance I feel her. She is not like other women. She is a force—a power."

Ruth forgot the cravat.

"Try it from near by," she said, half rising from her chair with an odd little smile. "Come. Let us get the introduction over. I do like the doneness of things."

Robert put out a detaining hand toward the lacy edge of her skirt, but stopped short of touching it.

## SIDE-ISSUES

"Not yet!" he begged. "Let me have my turn out. I thought it would never come. You know I talk to nobody but you."

Ruth sank back in her seat.

"Not even to Geoffrey?"

"Not in the least as I do to you. One can be the closest of friends, and yet— You always understand halfway."

"So would Geoffrey. He has a talent for understanding." Ruth's voice sounded less incisive, and singularly sweet.

"He has. But I am tongue-tied. It is my wretched habit of reserve. As to Geoffrey, he is the all-roundest fellow in the world. He has a talent for everything. I wish I had the half of it. If I had—ah, then I could do something!"

Ruth was looking at him charmingly, her merry eyes softened, all the whimsical curves of her pretty mouth subdued and winning.

"Do what?"

Robert's eyes fired. He lifted his head impetuously, running his long fingers recklessly

## THE LETTER D

through his thin fine hair, setting it in hopeless disorder.

“Do what—heart and brain—I am full of!” he answered with sudden feverish energy. “Do what I dream of—try for—night and day. I have told no one—not even my father. I can’t. Anything so supremely a part of one’s self acquires fictitious sanctity. Yet I have thought—I have wanted—” he looked at her earnestly—“Miss Ruth, may I tell you—sometime?”

Ruth’s face was sweeter than he remembered ever to have seen it. The faintest possible tinge of red gleamed fugitively under her dark skin.

“When you care to tell me, I shall like to hear,” she replied with unwonted gentleness. Then, embarrassed by her own softness of mood, she wilfully dismissed it, and sprang lightly to her feet, her head at a critical angle, the merry light again in her eyes. “Mr. Dunbar, your cravat is quite at odds with the world. It is a mere social prejudice, of course, but would you

## SIDE-ISSUES

mind twisting it to the left? A shade more, please. And your hair—could you smooth it into less of a cushion full of pins? There. Now I will present you to Miss Pruyn."

Constance, though by far the most beautiful woman in the hall, had by no means been a belle that evening. Save for one or two promenades, grudgingly granted, she had remained seated by her aunt, attracting much admiring notice, but talking only with two or three, and looking quietly about the room with gravely interested eyes. The unusual quality of Robert Dunbar's personality, however, at once held her attention. Geoffrey's description, "all brains with only body enough for ballast," flashed upon her memory as Ruth presented him. Robert's first impulse of shyness over, he responded with alacrity to her evident liking, and the three sat talking easily, while Miss Alicia, Christianly crucifying her preferences, took the opportunity to offer herself as pilot about the room to an unpleasant old gentleman so deaf and blind that

## THE LETTER D

but for a guiding hand he was safe nowhere away from the wall.

"I did not know I should enjoy the evening so much," Constance said. "I find I like being an on-looker at a ball. It is as entertaining as a play, and has the advantage that every actor represents his own character."

Ruth raised her delicately drawn eyebrows dubiously.

"It is a pantomime rather than a drama, isn't it? Can one reveal the depths of one's soul in dumb show?"

Constance glanced down the room toward a group of chaperons that earlier in the evening she had privately stigmatized as a collection of dullards. Geoffrey now stood by the least attractive of the women, bending interestedly toward her and speaking with even more than his usual animation. Her hitherto impassive face was become wonderfully alight; those nearest were turning smilingly to take part in the talk; the others were leaning forward to

## SIDE-ISSUES

listen. In a moment the entire group was vitalized.

Constance turned back to Ruth.

"I have been watching your brother this evening," she answered with seeming irrelevancy, and with a curiously impersonal manner. "There is hardly any one here to whom he has not paid some pleasant attention. Apparently no one bores him. He seems to find every one charming, and to be endowed with a remarkable facility for making others as happy as he is himself."

"It would be remarkable in anybody else," Robert interposed, gratified at this tribute to his friend. "But Geoff is a *Glückskind*. One may expect everything for him and of him."

"Even *Glückskinder* have their limitations," Constance said slowly, disarming Ruth with the first smile she had seen on her face. "Might one not come to expect too much even of them?"

Robert, too, glanced at the group of chaperons. Geoffrey was closing a draughty window

## THE LETTER D

behind them with as much concern as were they individually his best friends. A look came over Robert's face as he watched him that was good to see.

"Geoff has an unlimited capital in his capabilities," he asserted positively. "We are safe to draw on it."

Constance bent her eyes on the feather fan lying like a snowdrift across her shimmering lap. Ruth wondered what made her face so sad. Robert took mental note of the perfect curve of her lids and the thickness and warmth of colour of her lashes' double fringe.

"Capabilities along other lines than the purely spiritual ones, do you mean? Along what lines? The law, perhaps?"

Robert laughed, giving his head an awkward jerk which again started his migratory cravat on its easy travels.

"Not the law. It is our mutual unfitness for the profession that draws us together there, though Geoff follows it as a pastime, and I for



## SIDE-ISSUES

my bread and butter. I mean along literary lines. If he would but go to work in earnest—if he would take up one out of the various stories he has started, and work it out—finish it—He has it in him to give us something great.”

“Why do you limit Geoffrey to the pen?” Ruth inquired casually. “He is quite as artistic and musical as he is literary.”

Robert shook his head vehemently.

“No, no! There is no question about it. His other gifts are all offshoots—all beside the mark. If he would only write in good earnest—he is a bit lazy intellectually, I admit—but if he could be spurred on, if he would let himself go, say out what is in him—”

“And why does he not?” Constance asked, suddenly lifting her eyes to Robert’s face. “It is criminal to fall short of one’s possibilities.”

“Surely it is,” Robert assented eagerly. “It is the unpardonable sin against that Holy Ghost which is in each of us. But Geoff has no

## THE LETTER D

realization of his powers. There was that little thing of his, dashed off to help out the Author's Table at the Fair last week—did you happen to see it? He gave it scarce a thought, but it was full of suggestiveness. If he had elaborated it—worked it over at all—”

“I read the story,” Constance said thoughtfully, opening and closing her fan with slow grace. “You are right. It was too good not to have been better. I saw some of the letters, too, that he wrote for the Post Office—most amusing they were.”

“Those conscienceless managers always rope Geoff in for everything,” laughed Robert, giving his cravat a tug, as he caught Ruth's eyes upon it, which landed it under the other ear. “Geoff never refuses aid. The letters were good, too, just the sort to take. They sold outrageously well.”

Constance was still looking at Robert with deep grave eyes that seemed asking the inmost truth of every statement. “But what has

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Mr. Doane written besides?" she asked. "What serious work?"

"Oh, Geoffrey's Pegasus is only a butterfly," Ruth put in lightly. "One cannot fancy it in harness."

"Indeed, Miss Ruth, you are mistaken," Robert rejoined earnestly, leaning toward her. "Geoff does himself injustice in these slight efforts. As I said, if he chose—if he would work—Ah, here he comes."

And just then Geoffrey appeared, with a face like a young god. He had obeyed Constance literally, remaining aloof the evening through, with only an occasional eloquent glance as he passed by in dance or promenade. But now his hour was come, and too eager for more than a faintly apologetic bow to her companions, he offered her his arm with a certainty of bearing that defied refusal, and bore her triumphantly off to the supper-room.

Ruth turned impulsively to Robert.

"What do you think of her? Does nearness

## THE LETTER D

increase or diminish her mysterious powers of influence?"

"Think of her!" Robert exclaimed jubilantly. "I have been looking for her—just her—for years! I never expected to find any one so exactly—manner, face, voice, everything—isn't she ideal? Soon—" he looked at Ruth, and a brilliant smile, elate and aspiring, illumined his clear, pale face, "if you will let me, I would like to tell you soon, now."

But Ruth was holding herself very straight, with a new little stiffness that made her all at once immeasurably remote.

"Isn't that Nannie Powers standing over there alone?" she asked, turning away. "That will not do. We must go to her."

## CHAPTER VI

### *A DRAUGHT OF WINE*

It is a low benefit to give me something ; it is a high benefit to enable me to be somewhat of myself.

EMERSON.

GEOFFREY succeeded in securing a small table in a secluded corner of the supper-room, and establishing Constance at its farther side he sat down facing her, with his back to the foolish crowd come there for no better purpose than to feast. Some dainty was duly set before them both. Geoffrey suffered it, that the waiter might be the sooner gone. But in another moment he had thrust his plate out of the way and was leaning over the table toward Constance, his smooth-shaven, finely-cut face full of expectancy, and his frank grey eyes that had never

## THE LETTER D

known any emotion to be ashamed of, looking straight into hers.

“You have something to say to me. There is nothing on earth that I want so much to hear. What is it?”

Constance, too, pushed aside her plate. Why make pretence of being there for any other reason than to have their talk out undisturbed? She slowly lifted her eyes, and he saw that what she had to say to him was no light ballroom matter.

“When are you going to do something—something worth while?” she began, driven to speech by an irresistible inward urgency. “When are you going to make up your mind to be something more than merely charming? You have inherited position. You have inherited culture. You have inherited wealth. All that most men end with you have begun with. You have inherited even your looks and your temperament—yes, your manners even, and all that wins you such easy

## A DRAUGHT OF WINE

liking. Are you willing to let that content you?" Her voice, low but vibrant, was like the lash of a whip. "Are you satisfied to owe all to inheritance, and nothing to yourself? Your talent is the only thing that is really yours. Do you mean to do no more than play with it? Shall you always make light of it—always trifle with it?—the one thing that you might make a name with, if you would?"

She paused, but the look on her face was a spell under which Geoffrey sat speechless. She went on pitilessly.

"When I first saw you—do you remember?—you presented yourself to me as Judge Doane's son. You used your father's name as a guarantee—a passport. Why should you hide under another man's name—even your father's? Why not make yourself one that shall need no other to introduce it,—a name of your own for strangers to recognize?"

The words cut. Geoffrey's colour paled and then flamed up riotously.

## THE LETTER D

"I cannot help saying all this," Constance continued more gently. "I know so well what you might become—know so well that if only you would you might be great—famous—all that I want you to be."

A deep blush overspread her cheeks as the last words slipped from her. She stopped short, and her eyes fell.

"All that you want me to be," Geoffrey repeated, deeply stirred. "When you look at me so—when you speak to me so—there is nothing under heaven that I would not try for—nothing that I do not feel that I could do, in your name and your strength, if not in mine."

Constance suddenly lifted her eyes again, as unself-conscious as before. Her look was a challenge.

"You will not content yourself with mere feeling, will you? Even the least of us can feel, you know. The most ungifted of us can fancy what we might have risen to under fostering conditions. That is the cheap privilege of the



## A DRAUGHT OF WINE

incapable—that is our compensation, or our humiliation, perhaps. But you—do not replace action by emotion. You have it in you to achieve!”

Geoffrey bent toward her.

“I am at your feet for all time,” he said, his voice as low and as vibrant as hers. “I shall wear your colours for ever. What orders do you lay on me?”

“Write!” Constance answered, her eyes flashing back purpose and will into his. “Write out of your largest thought, your deepest soul. Let nothing less than your best satisfy you. Give the world your uttermost.”

“If you realized how poor that is!”

“You have never given it to us yet,” Constance averred, with a conviction which seemed to render negation superfluous. “Thus far you have written only surface things—whatever you could throw off without trouble. Is that the way to attain to one’s best? Is not what is done too easily apt to be of little value? One’s best

## THE LETTER D

lies out of reach, except through persistent efforts—efforts that take all a man's grit. But you are not afraid of work, are you?"

Geoffrey raised his head proudly and drew a long breath that swelled out his broad chest to superb proportions. "I am afraid of nothing. If you believe in me, I must believe in myself. I will do what I can. If I fail—"

"You will not fail," she interrupted quickly, her wonderful voice stirring strange aspirations and hopes in him. "No man fails who determinedly ignores failure—who wills to succeed at all hazards. You have only to will strongly enough, only to try hard enough,—"

"I will to satisfy you," Geoffrey said, bending farther over the narrow table between them. "With all that I have and all that I am, I will to satisfy you. That is my single ambition. I care for nothing else. I will to satisfy you."

A look that she could not keep back leaped from her eyes to his, and she saw that it set his soul on fire. She rose hurriedly.

## A DRAUGHT OF WINE

"Come. We must not talk longer. There is my aunt. Take me to her."

Geoffrey, too, sprang up, and stepping quickly around the table stood close to her.

"And if I succeed?" he murmured, looking deep down into her eyes.

Her lids fell.

"There must be no ifs. You must succeed."

They stood so a half minute more, eloquently silent. Then Geoffrey offered his arm and conducted her to Miss Alicia. Not another word was spoken between them. Yet each knew that in that moment a promise had been asked and given.

## CHAPTER VII

### *MISS McINTYRE'S TEA*

Creation's heir, the world, the world is mine !

GOLDSMITH.

FEBRUARY and March had gone by. April, light-footed, tender-tinted, rainbow-wreathed, stepped upon the land, and everywhere the trees were a liquid golden green, as if sun and rain had run together into leaf. Wendover was a tree-loving city, as its broad streets with their double rows of elms and maples bore witness, while every house that had an acre of ground boasted its private forest. Around All Saints' rectory the trees grew so luxuriantly that from the avenue, less than a hundred feet away, nothing was visible of the low, grey-stone, eccle-

## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

siastical-looking structure except its arched front door. But the Reverend Eugene Dunbar would never have lingered on the cloistered piazza that ran the width of the building, had not that misty tissue of pale freshness ensured him perfect seclusion. He was standing there now, very tall, spare and scholarly-looking, gazing out over the new-made world with a thanksgiving in his heart that it would have gone hard with him outside of his pulpit to put into words. In his pulpit, indeed, panoplied in his consecrated robes, his incubus of timidity fell from his fine high soul like a loosened fetter, setting him free to address his people eloquently and unafraid, with an intimacy of understanding and a completeness of sympathy, which for that brief magnetic space made him absolutely one with them.

But with the removal of the signs of office, he instantly became the silent, retiring, diffidently-sensitive recluse whom all loved though none knew, shrinking helplessly from any expression

## THE LETTER D

of emotion, and retrenching himself behind a breastwork of reserve that held the boldest at bay. Even Robert approached him no nearer than the rest, great as was the affection and trust between them. Their natures were too similar for this to have been otherwise, and ever since the death of the young wife and mother, they had lived their lonely lives thus side by side in dumb accord, neither conscious of any lack in their companionship.

Robert stood near his father now, absently caressing the huge head of a nobly-bred St. Bernard, and rapturously drinking in the beauty of the young day, while repeating appreciatively to himself:

“The lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf  
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf.”

The striking of the town clock reminded him of his waiting duties, and he was starting for his office, his father accompanying him to the head of the steps, when there came a clear, pene-

## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

trating, imperious call: "Here. I want you. Both of you."

Robert flung away a freshly-lighted cigar and hurried down the path, his father following slowly, with a stifled regret at having so thoughtlessly ventured within sight, while the dog plumped stolidly down where he was, sniffing the soft breeze lazily like a *blasé* connoisseur.

Miss McIntyre's wheel chair stood at the rectory gate. She barely waited for the customary greetings.

"Will you come to five o'clock tea next Thursday? Don't stand on ceremony. I am doing my inviting this way. It is easier than writing—cheaper, too. Put me inside the gate, Henrietta." This, as a passer stumbled against her front wheel, going on with a bruised shin and an apology that was a disguised imprecation. "I can't have stupids walking over me and scratching my chair. Well, gentlemen, will you come?"

Dr. Dunbar and Robert being surprised into

## THE LETTER D

an acceptance, she briskly checked off their names upon her list, and sat meditating.

“Let me see, what was it I wanted? Henrietta, this young gentleman will see me home. You needn’t waste time here. On your way back run in and ask Mrs. Parsons to lend me a set of tea-cups for next Thursday—her Dresden flowered set. I haven’t enough china. Oh, and, Henrietta—”she raised her voice to call after the promptly departing maid—“tell her she may send teaspoons with it. Well—” she turned back to the two victims anxiously awaiting further mischances, “I am glad I caught you. When I play early bird, I like it to be to good purpose. Of course I am too ill to be entertaining in this way. But people are beginning to treat me as if I were already dead—nobody invites me anywhere—and I must do something to show that I am alive, in spite of suffering agonies with gout at this very moment. Not that any one cares for that. As soon as your disease is chronic—that is, when you are never



## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

out of pain instead of having it only occasionally—everybody loses interest in it, from your doctor down. I suppose they think the pain ends by becoming comfortable, like a pair of old shoes. Besides, the only way to convince some people that you are ill is by dying, and having thus gained your point—where are you? But I didn't come to talk of myself. There are but two people to whom one should ever say 'I'—one's mother, and one's lover."

Dr. Dunbar laid a gentle hand on the back of the old lady's chair, and subtly aware of his compassion, she peered graciously at him around the edge of a bonnet whose eccentricities had long ceased to be a novelty. Even unvoiced sympathy is of value, if one only understands that it is there. It is the no-sympathy, not its non-expression, that hurts.

"Well, well," she said. "'Every dog must have his day,' and each dog should know enough to retire gracefully when his day is over. But I mean my day to be a Norwegian one. So be

## THE LETTER D

sure you come on Thursday. I can promise you an excellent cup of tea. I got Mrs. Mortimer to give me a pound or two out of a chest of Orange Pekoe she had direct from China, and Ruth is to make it. And by the way, what I wanted is the loan of your waitress. You can easily spare her. Bachelors like you can always dine out anywhere, and what with my doctor's bills and my subscription to your church organ, I can't be hiring extra help."

Dr. Dunbar patiently consented, though remembering that her contribution to the organ was most likely to be recalled, having been given on the distinct understanding that it should be refunded if the instrument disappointed her; and Miss McIntyre, in high good humour, suggested that a batch of his cook's superior tea-cakes might be sent her with the waitress. Then she bade him good-bye and directed Robert to wheel her home.

"Go by way of Mrs. Hunt's," she ordered, when they were in the street. "It is but a block

## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

farther, and she has a tablecloth that will just fit my extension table. Don't run me into the posts, young man. Can't you keep to the middle of the sidewalk? Let other people turn out for me. I have the right of way, of course."

Miss McIntyre in her chair, with whatever charioteer she could entrap, had long been a familiar sight to her acquaintances, attracting no more attention than ensured their possible escape. But it was difficult to evade her sharp-sighted vision, and while grimly remarking upon the singularity that every one she knew had business down the next corner, she succeeded in hailing several flying friends, and in extracting from them a promise of attendance at her Tea.

Her business with Mrs. Hunt transacted, through the medium of an astonished and unwilling butler, their further way led by the Slades. As they rounded the corner of the street, Robert caught sight of Constance and

## THE LETTER D

Geoffrey in the Manor grounds, standing by a bed of hyacinths, deep in a conversation that evidently had wandered far from the blossoms at their feet. Involuntarily he quickened his pace, desiring to save them an interruption. But Miss McIntyre's shrewd black eyes were everywhere at once, and instantly espying them, she peremptorily bade him stop.

At her repeated call the couple looked round inquiringly, then came leisurely together across the lawn under the huge lindens, Constance in a white gown and bare-headed, and Geoffrey swinging his hat in his hand, his copper locks and her gold braids shining brilliantly as the sun caught them. Tall, finely made and beautiful they both were, and Robert, looking at them, felt a thrill of loyal pride.

"What were you talking about?" Miss McIntyre demanded tartly, as they leaned down over the low iron fence on the terraced wall. "I could hardly make you hear. It is too early in the morning to be so absorbed as that."

## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

"Morning, noon or night is all one when it comes to Miss Pruyn's commands," Geoffrey answered brightly. "You will not wonder that I am deaf and blind, too, when I tell you—I do not mind your knowing it, Miss McIntyre—that I am in the throes of authorship. I am writing a book."

"A book!" echoed Miss McIntyre. "Indeed. It is high time you tried your mettle. It is a novel, I suppose. That is the most you are good for."

"As if a novel were not worthy a writer's best effort!" Robert exclaimed indignantly, his face flushing. "As if it might not include every form of writing! What does it exclude?—philosophy, history, natural science, religion, satire, art? I would like to know who needs to be more broadly educated, more widely read, more variously endowed than the first-rank novelist. Don't be brow-beaten, Geoffrey! Give us a romance that shall set Miss McIntyre's scorn to confusion!"

## THE LETTER D

"He will," Constance said in her deep calm voice. "He will give us a book we shall all be proud of."

Geoffrey twirled his hat nervously between his hands.

"That is my noble intent," he said, with a light laugh. "But—" a worried look crossed his open face and was gone. "Well, I have my *magnum opus* fairly in hand this time, I think. A chapter or two more will see the finish. At least, I hope so. I should not have the grit to try again if this went back on me. I have thrown a dozen unworkable plots into the wastebasket already."

"A dozen! Ye gods!" ejaculated Robert. "If that is not fecundity of imagination—"

"Maybe it is, but it isn't my tea-party," interposed Miss McIntyre. "What I stopped for, Constance, was to ask you to see to my decorations next Thursday. That is in your line, and Alicia and Sara will be only too pleased to let

## MISS MCINTYRE'S TEA

me have any flowers that I need. It is time their bloated conservatories were cleared out anyway. Come on, Robert, I can't stay here all day, even if Geoffrey is writing a novel. Don't forget my Tea, Geoffrey. I am counting on you to pilot my guests to the dining-room. That is more important than your book."

"Nothing is more important than his book," Constance said lightly, but the look she flashed on him emphasized the words. Geoffrey returned her look gravely; then his face brightened, and with a laughing rejoinder he took leave of her, and vaulting over the fence, gallantly insisted upon wheeling Miss McIntyre home himself.

Apparently even the clerk of the weather was under the orders of this autocratic old dame, for the sky was swept clean for the afternoon of her Tea, and it was in the best of spirits, though, as she repeatedly averred, in the worst conceivable health, that she prepared to receive her guests in her admirably appointed drawing-room. For

## THE LETTER D

though the old lady often made acrimonious references to vast reverses sustained at some indistinctly dated period of her life, regretfully ascribing to these the diminishing rates of her charities, they had not necessitated her leaving her fine old home, nor visibly curtailed her luxuries. The gown that she wore upon this occasion, while fashioned in the erratic style that it had pleased her to adopt, was of superb material and profusely adorned with exquisite lace. And her jewels were a wonder.

“Legacies, my dear, legacies,” she murmured mournfully to whoever admired them. “Tokens that my dearest friends are dead.”

She was, however, exceedingly gracious to the living friends who were now gathered in her home, and who by no means filled it, as she had been careful to ask only those from whom she desired invitations in return. The rooms were charmingly dressed with the spoils of the Slades’ hot-houses, and when Ruth blithely entered the dining-room to take charge of the perfectly



## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

served table, she found Constance already seated for the same purpose at its other end.

"This is very nice," Ruth said heartily. "I did not know that you, too, were to be a Tea-dispensary."

"I did not want to be," Constance frankly acknowledged, "but I could not get out of it. After what Miss McIntyre said of her old attachment to my father, it seemed an obligation. I had not understood before that they were such friends."

Ruth bit her lips to restrain a smile. Acquaintance with facts was inconvenient in the face of Miss McIntyre's recollections.

"It is natural to be sitting behind this tea-service," Constance went on, looking down at the handsome tray before her. "It is Aunt Alicia's, you know. Miss McIntyre needed two."

"She borrowed ours on the same need," Ruth rejoined, with a comical glance at the equally handsome array of silver at her end of the table. "Her own set is tucked away upstairs."

## THE LETTER D

She said she could not have strange servants scratching it. Her china is all upstairs, too, lest it get nicked. I recognize a number of neighbourly best sets at this feast, not to mention some gastronomical *chefs-d'oeuvre*. A sort of involuntary donation party, is it not?" And then the girls laughed in unison, and felt that beginning of a better acquaintance to which a humorous situation often furnishes the introduction.

"I am glad to have this time with you before the guests come," Constance said, looking at Ruth with friendly eyes. "I want really to know you. We all have our private Shibboleths by which to recognize who is or is not of our kind, and by mine you and I should be friends. Yet we have never gone below the surface yet."

"Nevertheless I know you well," Ruth answered mischievously. "Geoffrey has been practising his hand at character portrayal for some time, not to mention Mr. Dunbar's prowess in that line."

## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

"Mr. Dunbar? But I have seen little of Mr. Dunbar," Constance said in her direct unevasive way, and Ruth, looking critically back at her, admitted to herself with an honesty above self-deception that this woman's beauty and charm had been in no way overlauded, even by Robert.

"He ought to bear you a grudge," Ruth asserted, still with her bright smile. "The law work falls entirely to his lot since my brother embarked upon novel making. Geoffrey goes to the office avowedly for no other purpose now than to write on his story. Has he shown it to you yet?"

"Oh, no. Have you seen it?"

"I? No!" Ruth had a funny long-drawn-out way of saying no that lent it a surprising amount of expression. "Geoffrey maintains that in criticism a man's foes are first those of his own household, and then all those of his township. So he avows that not a creature shall be allowed a fling at his book till it is safe-

## THE LETTER D

guarded by publication. Still I thought—just you, perhaps—” She hesitated.

Constance did not notice the implication of the unfinished phrase. She sat, as before, quite tranquil and unembarrassed, her eyes resting on Ruth’s face with the intent understanding look which made her listening always like a spoken answer.

“I for one prefer to wait till after the publication to see the story,” she said presently, as Ruth did not go on. “Print often saves a book from destruction as marble saves a statue. Fancy us all throwing little pellets of fault-finding at a clay model! Certainly, though, your brother cannot be called ‘intellectually lazy’ now, can he? Is not Mr. Dunbar satisfied with his industry?”

Ruth did not care to talk about Robert. She was bending over the tea paraphernalia with a pretty housewifely air.

“I have scarcely seen Mr. Dunbar of late,” she replied indifferently. “My kettle is on the verge

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of explosion. If some one does not come soon—”

But as she spoke a bevy of people came gaily in, and the afternoon's work began. It was late before Geoffrey appeared, incurring thereby Miss McIntyre's displeasure, and the remark when at last he arrived, buoyant and smiling as always, that she did not see why he came, if he could not come when he was wanted.

Geoffrey bent coaxingly over her chair. “You should not say so cruel a thing to me, dear Miss McIntyre. You would not if you knew in how critical a plight I left my hero in order to come to you at all. He may be dead before I get back to his rescue.”

“The best thing that could happen,” snapped the hostess. “I never read a novel yet that would not have been a hundred per cent. better with the hero left out. All heroes are abnormalities. Is not that true, Dr. Dunbar?” She appealed to the clergyman, who had deferred his arrival till the last possible moment, and was now

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bravely endeavouring to appear less like the guest without a wedding garment than he felt. "See here. This fellow is turning out a novel. Do advise him to let heroics go and try for sanities."

Dr. Dunbar gave Geoffrey a grave smile which lighted up his scholarly face very pleasantly.

"I advise him to let no good go out of his book that he can keep in it. Pray accept my congratulations in advance, Mr. Doane."

"Is Mr. Doane writing a novel?" inquired Mrs. Quixley, a thin brisk woman with clever eyes and a hideous mouth of such serviceable dimensions that it looked as if Nature had designed her for a town-crier. "Excuse me. I could not help overhearing. And it is *so* interesting. Mary, Mr. Doane is writing a novel! Carrie—Miss Morgan—did you hear? Mr. Doane is writing a novel!"

And in a few moments, to Geoffrey's intense annoyance, the entire roomful was talking of nothing else, and the atmosphere seemed but a

## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

saturated solution of Book. Disclaimers, subterfuges, evasions, were alike unavailing. Which ever way he turned he was beset with a host of idiotic questions. Was it historical? They hoped so. They doted on historical novels. They hoped not. They loathed historical novels. Did it end right? It must, or they would none of them read it. Was it proper? If not, they would read it, of course, but it could never go into the Library. Above all, it must be no kind of a Sunday school book. Was it one of those tiresome novels with a purpose? Was it one of those dreadful dialect stories? Whose style did he follow? Meredith's? James'? Stevenson's? If Meredith's, would he mind translating the hardest sentences in footnotes? If James', wouldn't he make it a good deal clearer by omitting everything except the parentheses? Wouldn't he read them the first chapter? They could not write a line, but they were admirable critics. Every one is born a qualified critic, though few are born poets, and fewer yet are

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born novelists. Wouldn't he read them at least the first page? or the opening sentence? That would be enough to judge the story by. What was its title? its plot? its chief character? its leading idea? its most telling situation?

The interest and flattering expectation behind the friendly banter were very real. But it was intolerable. And finally, though he had exchanged only half a word with Constance, Geoffrey was driven from the house in self-defence.

Robert came in later yet. He was so late in fact that when he entered the dining-room it was almost empty. He came forward with an impetuosity foreign to him, the collar of his hurriedly donned frock coat turned up aggravatingly, and a straight black lock, disarranged in removing his hat, waving above one ear. His eyes were brilliant, and there was a hardly subdued air of triumph about him that struck Ruth oddly in the single glance she gave him. What had happened since she had last seen him?

She rose from her seat, shaking out the pale



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grey folds of her pretty gown with a determined little hand, and turned to Constance.

"With your permission, Miss Pruyn, I will leave you to dispense the rest of these altruistic hospitalities. There is something I must see to upstairs."

What required Ruth's presence in that deserted and unfestal region was not immediately apparent. She wandered desultorily about, humming a lively little ragtime tune, until she chanced upon Henrietta's work basket. A half-knitted wash-rag, the needles thrust through a ball of white cotton, protruded from this engagingly. Ruth seized upon it, settled herself cosily in a big rocking chair, and fell to rocking and knitting diligently, always to the accompaniment of the lively little tune, until the cessation of murmuring sounds below, and a sharp-keyed command to Henrietta to bid those gossiping maids clean up and go home, assured her that the last guest had left. Then she jumped up, replaced the work basket, ran lightly down the

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stairs, peeped into the drawing-room to nod a merry good-bye to Miss McIntyre, who, tired and cross, begged to be left to die in peace, and catching up her wraps, let herself out of the front door. As she paused to draw the hood of her cape over her head and gather her dainty skirts together before walking the few blocks to Red Roofs, Robert came up to her.

"I have been waiting an eternity," he said impatiently. "What on earth kept you? Why did you go away and leave me to Miss Pruyn?"

Ruth nonchalantly re-arranged her skirts. "Was not that right? I was endeavouring feebly to adjust my actions by the Golden Rule."

"A misapplication of that Rule justifies battle, murder and sudden death," Robert retorted savagely. "You couldn't have supposed I wanted you to go away."

"Why not?—under the circumstances."

"*You?*"

"How beautiful she was," Ruth observed meditatively. "It is astonishing that she can be

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so beautiful without even troubling to set her mind to it."

Robert scowled. "I have nothing to say against Miss Pruyn's beauty. It has served me to excellent purpose. I am profoundly grateful to it. But it is not to go into raptures over it that I have hung about here this interminable time."

"No? What can it be, then?"

The day had clouded over, as even the most beautiful April days will do, and a wind chill with the memory of March was sweeping down the street. Ruth drew her cape closer, seeming with the gesture to shut herself in miles away from him. But Robert was too overwhelmingly full of his subject to be rebuffed.

"Do you remember my saying at the Assembly Ball that I had something to tell you? You did not seem especially interested. But I simply must tell you now—this moment. Miss Ruth—"

She interrupted him. "Wait. Let me guess. It makes me feel so clever to guess right. Your something concerns Miss Pruyn."

## THE LETTER D

He broke into a surprised laugh.

“Miss Pruyn? Heavens, no! Or yes. It does in a way.” He laughed again in genuine amusement, a true-hearted, confidence-inspiring laugh. “It concerns her to the extent—large or small as you choose to consider it—that I took her for my heroine. Her face—everything about her—fitted in exactly. It was a stroke of luck my meeting her. Miss Ruth—” his voice rang—“I have been writing a novel, too! I finished the last line of my typewritten copy this afternoon. And it is good. It is *good*. I *know* that it is good!”

Ruth stopped short. “You! A novel! Is the thing infectious? I have often felt that you might write—that you ought to write, but I did not know—”

“Nobody knows. I wanted to tell you first.”

It was not yet dusk, though the lowering clouds made the hour appear later than it was. Thus far they had been walking apart, but now Robert took her hand and drew it through his

## MISS MCINTYRE'S TEA

arm. The simple action seemed a uniting of their interests.

"It means endlessly much to me," he said eagerly. "If this story is as good as I think it, I shall give up law and make writing my profession. I have always written. I began as a mere boy. My whole life has been an apprenticeship to the pen. I never told anybody, but I had to write, even though nothing was worth keeping. The little I have read has been only of the best. That gave me my standard, and nothing I wrote or rewrote ever came near to it. I destroyed everything as soon as finished. But this—I have written it at white heat—at a flash. It is dramatic. It lives—moves. It is the real thing. It must be the real thing. I could not tell you of it if it were not. To tell you is its consecration."

Ruth had turned toward him. Under the pale grey hood that made a twilight cloud about her face he saw her clear eyes shining like two stars. Red Roofs was very near. Unconsciously their steps lagged.

## THE LETTER D

“God meant me for a writer,” Robert went on solemnly. “It is my vocation—my life-call. The impulse to write has always been like a live thing inside me goading me on. I can’t rest. I can’t let it alone. I can’t turn to other things. I have to write—or at least to try for it. That trying to write—I can’t express it—but it feels like running at full speed to catch up with something just ahead—something larger, bigger than I, that I am always within an ace of overtaking, yet never reach. I get discouraged often enough. Often I want to give it up, the race seems so hopeless. But I can’t. Always there is that something inside me and yet outside me that prods me on. And in spite of my failures I know that it is bigger even than the thing I am after, and that to the end of my life it will keep whipping me on to do better than my best.”

“Why did you not tell me this before?” Ruth murmured, with a soft sigh of comprehension. “Did you not know how it would interest me?”

## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

Robert's hand closed suddenly over the tiny fingers on his arm. They had passed through Red Roofs' gateway, and were walking slower still, though the clouds were close now and an occasional splashing drop gave warning of coming rain.

"You can't think how I wanted to tell you—just you! But I could not till I had done something worthy. I can't be deceiving myself now." He gave a confident toss of the head. "If I am right—I shall not speak of it till I know—then I will come out boldly, nail my colours to the mast, and set sail!"

Ruth laughed a low happy little laugh.

"And what does your father say? Is he not pleased?"

"He knows nothing about it. I told you nobody knows that I write. I wanted it to be your and my secret together first of all. I hurried to you to-day the instant I had the last word copied, and you would not even stay to hear!"

## THE LETTER D

"But I left you with Miss Pruyn," Ruth said, withdrawing her hand from his arm to brush back the blown hair from her cheek. "Was not that fair? Should she not know first of all? You said she was your heroine."

"So she is. I took her without so much as a by-your-leave, and put her in bodily—all but by name. My conscience pricks me a bit on that score. Am I any better than a thief, enriched by stolen goods? Still, now that I have done with her—"

The drops were falling faster, and the wind had a dash of ice in it. But they had reached the house and were standing under the shelter of the portico, realizing nothing except that they were still together.

"Done with her?" Ruth echoed.

The surprise and incredulity in her voice struck on Robert's ear.

"Ruth!" he cried passionately. "Did you misunderstand this once? Did you think for a moment—"



## MISS McINTYRE'S TEA

Ruth gave a quivering laugh that bravely tried to be light and mocking.

"Have I guessed wrong, then? Am I less clever than I thought?"

Robert caught her two hands and bent his eloquent face to hers.

"Can it be that you never guessed the truth? I thought you must guess it—must guess what it is so impossible to keep back. Don't you know that I am waiting only till I have something to offer you—a fortune—a name—*Ruth*—"

Her hood had fallen back. His breath stirred the loose hair on her forehead. The mocking lightness was gone quite out of her face, and in its stead was a sweetness beyond belief. She looked up at him, her answer trembling on her lips, when there came the sound of quick steps moving toward them inside the house, and the two moved instinctively apart just as the door opened and Geoffrey hurried out.

"O Ruth, that is good," he exclaimed cheer-

## THE LETTER D

ily at sight of her. "I was going over for you. Come in, Rob, come in, and have some dinner to wash out the memory of that blackguardy Tea!"

Ruth slipped past her brother without a word and vanished in the hall. The wind rushed in after her through the open door, and seemed to fail to find her. Robert drew back.

"Not now, Geoff. I can't. Not to-night. I must see you though. Will you come to the office bye-and-bye? I will meet you there in an hour's time."

## CHAPTER VIII

### *ASHES*

Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,  
And without sneering teach the rest to sneer ;  
Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,  
Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike.

POPE.

WITHIN the hour Geoffrey, who was punctuality itself, was on his way to the office, wondering a little what Robert might want of him. He was not in the mood for literary work, and intended, after seeing Robert, to call at the Manor for the inspiration which a talk with Constance never failed to bring him.

The evening was stormy and cold, the wind blowing in gusts. He went down the street at a swinging pace, his chest thrown out and his handsome head well up. He liked walking against the wind, as he liked everything that called for strength and action. Reaching a

## THE LETTER D

building in which were many of the law offices of the town, he went up its deserted stairway to the second storey three steps at a time, and letting himself into his rooms, passed through the empty outer apartment to the inner and larger one. Here lights were burning low and a fire smouldered on the hearth, giving a sense of occupation, although Robert was not there.

“Late as usual,” he said to himself with an indulgent shrug. “Heaven has not cursed him with the virtue of punctuality.”

Geoffrey was one of those few men who possess the magical touch which imparts at once to whatever room they enter its most comfortable and attractive aspect. Now he turned certain lights on full and lowered others, straightened a disordered table, stirred the deadened coals into a blaze, and rolled the two easiest chairs invitingly up to the hearth. This done, he lighted a cigar, and went to his desk for his manuscript, that he might while away the time of waiting by revising his afternoon’s work.

## ASHES

There he found a package and a note addressed to himself in Robert's small strong clever hand.

"The rascal has put me off!" Geoffrey conjectured with a good-humoured smile.

He stood still, lazily puffing out half a dozen rings of blue smoke and watching them curl away over his head with a gratifying consciousness of well-being and of life's satisfactoriness in general. Then he broke open the note, and read:

"Dear old chap, after all I won't wait. I can't face your astonishment. Here is my book, hot from the fire of the forge. Is it what I think it, or am I an egregious ass, caught in a quagmire of ambition? Decide, please. I want no surer critic than yourself. Meantime keep my secret. And be chary of cigar ashes. I am confiding to you my one and only copy.

"Yours,

"R. D.

"P.S.—Have I done my heroine justice?"

Geoffrey read the note twice over without grasping its contents. What in the name of

## THE LETTER D

common sense was Robert driving at? Was it some practical joke? Turning to the package for explanation he untied the wrapper and brought to light a ream or more of typewritten quarto sheets. The outer one bore the inscription in large black letters: "The Requit. A Novel."

Geoffrey looked down at it in amazement, mixed with dismay. Then a smile slowly shaped itself about his straight sweet mouth, parting the clean-cut lips and showing a gleam of perfect teeth.

"By Jove!" he said aloud. "So this is what he has been up to, and I without a suspicion! Sly dog! Good heavens, the length of it! And he expects me to wade through the trash and then let him down easy! As if I had not better be at work of my own!"

He fingered the sheets reluctantly, still with a smile of amusement, half inclined to leave them and hurry on to the Manor. Then a sentence, short, terse, and vigorous, caught his at-

## ASHES

tention. He read it again perplexedly, read another farther down the page, re-read that also, almost doubting what he read, rapidly turned over several pages and read bits at random, his face slowly flushing, and finally, going hurriedly back to the beginning, he read on consecutively with increasing astonishment, tossing sheet after sheet to the floor as he finished it. What under heaven did it mean? This was no trial effort, no abortive, amateur conception. Was this masterpiece really Robert's? Good God, had he *this* in him—this marvellous constructive ability, this force and beauty of expression, this richness of imagery, this virility, this fire, this something that could be no less than genius?

The clock on the mantel struck eleven. The sound penetrated to Geoffrey's consciousness. Straightening himself with a start, he looked round to find that he had been standing bent over his desk since half past eight o'clock. His cigar had long ago gone out; the fire was ashes;

## THE LETTER D

he was tired, cold and stiff. Tossing away his cigar, he emptied a scuttle full of soft coal into the grate, and drew one of the easy chairs closer to the hearth. Before sitting down, however, he stepped back to the desk and stooped to glance again at the last paragraph. There he still stood, fascinated and absorbed, still tossing off page after page, when the clock sounded the half hour.

He raised himself once more impatiently, and giving a shove to the sheets on the floor that scattered them broadcast, he went slowly to the waiting chair and seated himself in it heavily, resting his elbows on his knees and dropping his head deep between his hands. His brain was in a whirl. The pulse at his temples beat hot and full. Odd thoughts fluttered brokenly and without sequence through his mind, gone before he could lay hold of them. He tried to calm himself down into rational reflection. Visions of Robert's published book floated dizzily before him. He seemed to be seeing it in every



## ASHES

one's hands, and hearing their amazed encomiums. Then the visions all melted into one, and as distinctly as if she sat there before him, he saw Constance bending over it, spellbound as he had been, her noble face full of the pride which nothing that he could ever write would bring into it, though he would give his life to put it there,—saw her lift her eyes in reproach that he could have left it to another to pay her this splendid homage. How divinely she stood out in Robert's pages, undisguised by the medieval setting, not a line wanting, not a shade forgotten, a living, breathing, exquisite personality, herself in every tenderest divination, herself in every boldest and finest stroke!

Geoffrey, too, had meant to make Constance his central outshining figure, around which the others revolved as planets around their sun. His book was to have been her apotheosis. It was only after repeated efforts that he had abandoned the idea, persuading himself that any likeness of her must be a sacrilegious

## THE LETTER D

failure. Now he knew that it could be done, successfully—gloriously—but never by him.

He writhed before the inevitable comparison. His sound critical sense, for awhile mysteriously in abeyance, came overpoweringly back. He turned it in on himself unsparingly. How clumsy, ineffective, crude, his best was! How inferior his style, how weak his plot, how uninterestingly worked out, how vaporously drawn his characters! It was as if a great light had suddenly been flashed over the paltry world of his creation, revealing it for what it was.

Why had Constance tempted him to try? Why had she not believed that he lacked the talent? She would believe it now with but a glance at Robert's book. But perhaps Robert's success would atone to her for his failure. Was it not always three cheers for the victor, no matter who won?

With the question a sharp pang of jealousy, the first that he had experienced in his happy

## ASHES

successful life, shot through him cruelly. He leaped out of his chair as if at an actual knife thrust, catching his breath with a gasp, and then sank back against the cushion, weak from the pain and the shame of it. Jealous of Robert?—jealous of his friend?

But the pain stayed. Constance had not bidden Robert test his powers. Why then had he written this book? Geoffrey would have stayed his hand for ever rather than rob a friend in such fashion. For that was its outcome. One needed to be no prophet to foresee the result. Her love was the guerdon of the man who could make himself a name, thrusting aside the crutch of inheritance to stand upright on his own strong feet. Which of them—he or Robert—would deserve that guerdon now?

The door in the outer room opened. Steps crossed the parquettèd floor and paused behind his chair.

“I saw your light, Geoff, and I had to come up. I could not wait till morning.”

## THE LETTER D

Geoffrey did not look round. A shiver of hate passed through him. It was all he could do to keep it from his voice.

"Is that you? It is deadly late. I was just going home."

Robert looked at the littered sheets on the floor.

"I see you have read the better part of my book already."

His tone was so eager, so full of confident expectation, that Geoffrey felt it like a flag triumphantly flaunted in his face.

"Yes, I have read a good bit of it," he answered. He rose slowly and faced about, openly suppressing the appearance of a yawn while fumbling in his pocket for his match case. "Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks. Well, Geoff?" Robert had stooped to the scattered sheets, rapidly paging them as he gathered them together. He glanced up at his friend anxiously now, struck by the indifference of his manner.

## ASHES

Geoffrey cut off the end of a cigar with scientific precision.

"Oh, you want my opinion, do you? What is the use? I suppose you are thinking yourself a Kipling at least."

Robert's face blazed.

"I did think the thing had merit," he said stoutly. "But go ahead. Let me have it from the shoulder. I want your honest impression."

Geoffrey was striking a match on the sole of his shoe. It failed to ignite, and he tried another which broke in his hand. With a suppressed ejaculation, he struck three at once, lighted his cigar and puffed a moment or two in silence.

"You see I have not read it all," he said presently in an off-hand way. "What possessed you to spin it out so confoundedly? Of course, though, you will condense it—alter it materially—in revision?"

Robert laid his pile of sheets by the side of the smaller pile on the desk.

## THE LETTER D

"It is revised," he said shortly without looking round, hurt by his friend's nonchalance. "This is the final copy."

"That is a pity," Geoffrey commented carelessly. "A first effort usually takes no end of revision. Your story has good points, of course. But—"

"Speak out, man. Don't mince matters. But what?"

"You don't want me to hack it to pieces, do you?"

"I want the truth," Robert answered, turning about abruptly."

"No, you do not," Geoffrey returned, in a hard, dry voice. "No writer in the first glamour of composition ever wants the bald truth. He wouldn't stand it. What he wants is praise, unlimited barefaced laudation, something as nearly as possible equivalent to his private opinion of its worth."

Robert had seated himself on the arm of a chair. His face was grown quite white.

## ASHES

"I don't understand," he said. "You are not yourself in the least. For some unexplained reason you seem to take a hostile attitude toward me. Is it—" he looked appealingly at his friend—"dear old man, you don't resent my making copy of Miss Pruyn, do you?"

Geoffrey was white, too. He was holding on to himself with might and main to keep the passion in him under. He scarcely trusted himself to answer, and was relieved to find that his voice sounded perfectly calm and cold.

"Why should I resent it? I do not. Every writer is privileged to get his copy where he can."

Robert rose and came toward him.

"Then in Heaven's name, what is it, Geoff? You surely can't mean—Have I been such an unmitigated donkey as to suppose—Is it rot? Don't spare my feelings. I am beginning to have none anyway. Be frank with me at least. Do you think it rot?"

Geoffrey's brain was still a whirl of chaotic

## THE LETTER D

thoughts against a terrible background of disappointment and jealous hate. It seemed to him as he carefully flicked off a speck of ash from his sleeve that it was somebody else than himself whom he presently heard speaking easily and naturally.

“No critic pretends to measure a first work by crucial standards. One makes allowances, of course. Still, even so, it is deuced unpleasant dissecting another fellow’s work and enumerating its defects. Of course—if I chose to be brutally frank—but what is the use? Anyway I decline the job. Better try one of these cigars, Bob. They are an extra good lot—Don Quixote de la Manches. Ward got them on one of his cruises.”

He pushed a box along the table in Robert’s direction, but Robert paid no heed. After a moment, during which he stared straight ahead with a set strained face, he slowly turned and went into the adjoining room and put on the cloak under whose convenient folds in the earlier



## ASHES

evening he had carried his manuscript safely and jubilantly through the rain. He lingered in the farther room, but Geoffrey did not call him back, even when the click of the latch announced that he was on his way to the stairs. And so he went out, very slowly and miserably, and Geoffrey was again alone.

As soon as he was satisfied that Robert was out of hearing, he hurried to the door and shot to the bolt. Afterward he went to every window that opened on the street and pulled down the shade. Once more he repaired the fire, and then with an eagerness which he could no longer repress, he flew to the desk, and snatching up the remainder of the manuscript, sat down with it and read on and on ravenously up to the very last word without once changing his position. Nor did he move for some time after he had finished, but sat breathless, his eyes fixed on the blank space below the final lines with a look as if he saw his thoughts written there and was afraid.

## THE LETTER D

At last he got up, laid all the sheets carefully together, retied the lot in the original wrapper, and thrusting the packet under the lid of his desk, drew out his own manuscript. His face darkened as he held it, and an intolerable disgust took possession of him. What endless hours of fruitless thought it had cost him! What ridiculous hopes he had built on it, what an absurd value he had set on it! He glanced through it disdainfully, turning its pages with scornful fingers, his contempt increasing with each line. Finally, reopening the desk, he collected every note-book, every memorandum connected with it, and going to the hearth, his lips compressed and an ugly furrow between his fine brows, he flung them all into the grate together with his manuscript. The fire was nearly out, but he crammed them down among the still live embers, and set a match to them in half a dozen places, and watched grimly till the last scrap had burned to cinders. Then, standing up, he looked sullenly across the room at his desk where Robert's masterpiece lay safe,

## ASHES

and his blood turned to gall. The best of us is at heart only a beast held in check.

"Damn him!" he said aloud, grinding his heel fiercely into the floor. "Damn him!"

The words fell on the silence like blows from a mailed hand. Geoffrey blanched as he realized that the voice he heard was his own. Dashing at the lights he turned them down angrily as if they had been so many eyes spying upon his passion, and after standing a moment uncertainly in the dark, groped for his hat, and flinging the office door to behind him, went down the stairs and out into the damp cold greyness of the early day.

## CHAPTER IX

### *THE MIDNIGHT FLYER*

What says the body when they spring  
Some monstrous torture-engine's whole  
Strength on it? No more says the soul.

BROWNING.

THE wind had died down, but it was still raining when Robert reached the street. He had left his umbrella in the office. It did not occur to him to go back for it. Nor did he turn toward home. Drawing his felt hat close over his eyes, he plunged down the first turn he came to, not caring where it led, and hurried on at random.

He had been mistaken; incredibly mistaken. What ghastly idiocy! What infernal vanity! Why had he been so precipitate? Why had he not waited till his first glow of enthusiasm had

## THE MIDNIGHT FLYER

died decently down, leaving him fit to judge his work dispassionately and sanely as he had judged everything else that he had written? Was such self-deception conceivable? Yet why did certain situations, certain characterizations, certain presentations of his plot persistently intrude upon him, defying criticism? Had his literary judgment gone hopelessly wrong?

Over and over he rehearsed the short scene. It was not what Geoffrey had said, for what had he said? It was what he had left unsaid—the infinitely more that he had so stingingly implied. Of course he had intended no slur, still less rudeness, but Robert flamed all over, recalling the humiliating indifference of Geoffrey's manner. He had not even taken the story seriously—had not considered it worthy discussion. He had thought it beneath criticism, despite the fact that he “made allowances”—measured it by no “crucial standards.” This from Geoffrey—his friend—the one critic from whom he had dreaded nothing except partiality—except too great a

## THE LETTER D

readiness to overlook defects, and from whom he had been prepared to beg a little more severity of judgment!

His faith in Geoffrey was unshaken. Their friendship was too sure for any strain to warp it, and he had rated Geoffrey as an infallible critic through too many years to question the justice of his verdict now. His cold constraint was doubtless due to unwillingness to voice his condemnation plainly. Geoffrey could scarcely have guessed—Robert devoutly hoped no one would ever guess—the womanishness of his make-up. Just the smallest show of sympathy—just the faintest consideration of natural feelings—how the unexpected lack cut!

Pshaw! What did feelings matter? What did anything matter beyond the fact that he had mistaken himself, that he had no talent, no vocation? It was the usual shameful history of the downfall of foolish aspirations. It was all that mad desire of the moth for the star which is the ruin of so many careers. But how was a man to

## THE MIDNIGHT FLYER

know himself? How was he to distinguish between the overloud cry of his ambitions, and a heavenly call to create and become one with the gods? And having once deceived himself, could any man ever regain his lost belief?

It was the completeness of his self-deception that dispirited him. His last failure he could have faced as he had his previous ones, without despair or lessened courage. But he had been so certain that this time he had attained his aim at a bound! Not a shadow of doubt had been in his mind but that his future was assured with all that it meant to him of possible blessedness. That was the unendurable sting back of it. Success had meant the right to ask Ruth Doane to be his wife.

A shrill whistle startled him into a realization of his surroundings. He found himself on the railroad tracks, and stepped to one side barely in time to allow a freight train to rumble interminably past. He did not know how far he had walked, nor in what direction,

## THE LETTER D

but seeing lights ahead he kept on, and presently reached Brightborough, a small wayside station a few miles beyond Wendover. No trains were expected at this hour; the railway platform was deserted, and the doors and windows of the little building were closed. The rain had rained itself into a damp thin mist, through which the few hanging lamps shed a moist and insufficient glimmer. Robert's cloak had protected him from the wet, but he suddenly discovered that he was tired, so tired that it was impossible to take another step, and he sank down in a discouraged heap on the edge of the platform, a few feet distant from the nearest line of tracks.

He sat there for some time, conscious only of his exhaustion, while the mist slowly cleared, lifting itself softly up from the earth bit by bit, and vanishing into the darkness like a ghost recalled. Then his idle attention was caught by a far-off spot of moving light. It fascinated him. He could not look away from it, and it



## THE MIDNIGHT FLYER

glared malignantly back at him like a gigantic eye encircled by sword-edged rays.

A whistle sounded in the distance, and an old man with a lantern emerged from the gloom behind the station, and shuffling to the edge of the platform, peered down the tracks.

"The Midnight Flyer," he observed toothlessly to Robert in senile friendliness. "Two cars and an engine. She's making up time."

He wagged his grey head once or twice at the coming train, unconcernedly, since it was not to stop, and dragged himself away again to the somewhere he had come from.

Robert gazed fixedly at the fierce yellow eye. It was rushing at him with incredible velocity and shooting out flames as it came, the huge body behind it outlined by a faint phosphorescent glow. In the air around was a confused hollow noise like the trampling of innumerable feet over a breaking bridge. The ground trembled. The platform shook. The lamps shook. Everything shivered as with apprehen-

## THE LETTER D

sion. There was something terrible about this Frankenstein monster hidden in the night, a creature with iron for flesh and fire for blood, knowing neither pity, nor fear, nor fatigue, obedient to no laws but those of its own inexorable being, a conscienceless mechanical Cyclops, set at a speed to outrun the hurricanes, and launched into space with only a slender grooved line for its guide. Robert held his breath. It was plunging at him with terrific bounds, as if it had singled him out from the universe to destroy him. The blackness of the night was become a part of it. He was no longer sensible of anything besides this rushing hell-born thing crashing annihilatingly down on him across an infinity of distance.

Now, with a crescendo shriek whose final note tore his brains in two, it was upon him. Involuntarily he sprang to his feet, lifting an arm automatically before his face. The ground shook as in an earthquake. The wooden building creaked at every joint. The lamps clat-

## THE MIDNIGHT FLYER

tered in their glass frames. There was a broken flash, a thundering roar, a sense as of the passing of an iron-swathed bolt of lightning, and a mighty sucking wind clutched at Robert's cloak, swirled him helplessly around like a straw in a maelstrom, and plucking his feet out from under him, flung him backward to the ground. It was over in less than an appreciable instant. The monster had come and gone like the horror of a dream. A moment more and the shining silver tracks reached blankly from nowhere to nowhere as before, and the peace of a great deliverance settled down over the tiny station. When the old man with the lantern shuffled out again, there was not even a glimmer of red light in the distance. There was only a motionless figure lying on the ground face upward with arms outstretched, its head upon the edge of the platform, and its feet pointed in the direction that the Frankenstein demon had passed.

## CHAPTER X

### *TIOGA PATH*

Ask nothing more of me, Sweet :  
All I can give you, I give.  
Heart of my heart, were it more,  
More would be laid at your feet.

SWINBURNE.

THE morning dawned dazzlingly, and Ruth's face as she ran down the stairs rivalled the day. The hall-door stood open, tempting her to the porch where her father was strolling, drinking in the before breakfast air as an appetizer. He greeted her with the especial smile which he reserved for this favourite daughter, and she slipped her wee hand gaily through his arm.

"Isn't this a *chef-d'oeuvre* of a day, Dad? Dame Nature has her Aprils down to perfection. Look at those magnolias! And that

## TIOGA PATH

pyrus japonica! Did you ever see anything so delicious?"

"I see something more so this minute," the Judge answered, patting her hand affectionately. "What is up, Ruthie? I never saw you so—so what? happy, is it?"

Ruth was indeed all a-bloom with that joy of anticipation which is to realization what the flower is to the fruit.

"I do feel as if I had taken out a first mortgage on happiness," she admitted demurely. "It is a very rich feeling, isn't it?"

"There is nothing like a valuable investment of the sort," her father agreed. "A good wife and good children are my best securities. I can snap my fingers at fate as long as I have those."

"But when you lose Molly won't that depress your market?"

"Not a whit," rejoined the Judge comfortably. "Ward will be another security joined to the lot. If it were you, though, Ruthie—" he added doubtfully.

## THE LETTER D

Robert's words of the night before were singing themselves over and over in Ruth's ears till it seemed as if every one must hear.

"What then?" she inquired nervously, rubbing her cheek against her father's sleeve. "My turn—it might come, too. What then, Dad, dear?"

The Judge put his arm fondly about her, blissfully unconscious of any imminence in the proposition. Abstract possibilities are blithely disposed of.

"Look as happy then as you do to-day, my dear," he replied lightly. "I shall need no other guarantee for your future. There comes Geoff back."

Ruth looked off toward the gate. "Where has Geoff been? I supposed him still abed. I do not hold with getting up early. The people who do it are invariably conceited the first half of the day and sleepy the last half, and that is what makes them so disagreeable to everybody.

## TIOGA PATH

What induced Geoff to break his usual excellent habit?"

"He was sent for to the Dunbars, I believe," the Judge said easily. "Some business matter, I take it. Geoff will not be good for much, though, till he gets that novel off his hands. His Muse seems uncommonly exacting. No out-of-hours allegiance will do her. But that is right. The whole of him should go into any work that is to be well done. I am glad to see him so engrossed—glad, too, that he is keeping it to himself till it is done. To accomplish good work, a man should always turn his back on his audience, like the leader of an orchestra, and look only at his tools. Hullo there, Geoff! The top of the morning to you, my boy!"

He waved his hand cheerily to the advancing figure, and father and daughter stood waiting, Ruth with a quickening of the pulse that sent a warm glow from head to foot. Could it have been anything besides business that Robert had

## THE LETTER D

wanted to say to his friend as early as this in the joy of the day?

But the expression on Geoffrey's face sent the blood icily back to her heart, and a fear fell over her like an eclipse. She could frame no question as her brother mounted the steps, and Geoffrey did not speak till he had quite reached them.

"Robert has had an accident," he said then, in a singularly repressed toneless way.

The beautiful April morning turned black before Ruth's eyes. Geoffrey's face made a blurred white spot in it.

"You mean that he is dead," she said, more unemotionally even than he.

"He may be by now," Geoffrey answered, staring off at a point between his father and sister as if he saw Robert standing there. "He was still living when I came away. But the doctors gave little hope. It is concussion of the brain."

"Still living," Ruth repeated to herself. The



## TIOGA PATH

blood flowed again through her veins. "Still living. Still living." She kept thinking the words over and over, staying herself upon the dull hope in them, while the interchange of question and answer went on between the others. Robert had been found at Brightborough station. No one knew why he was there. Yes, he had struck his head in falling. Yes, there had already been a consultation. No, they gave no more hope than merely that he was not yet dead.

Ruth had been holding mechanically by her father's arm. She dropped it and took Geoffrey's. But he did not notice her light touch, and presently, stirring restlessly aside, let her hand fall. In some troubles each must stand by himself.

It was a relief when at last every one had been told all that there was to know, and the family gathered around the delayed breakfast table where the talk drifted to usual things. Nothing helps life back into its customary channels

## THE LETTER D

more than its prosaically recurring meals. Ruth had to force herself to bear a part in the easy chatter lest her quiet attract notice. No one was surprised, however, at Geoffrey's distressed silence. Robert had been his dearest friend. *Had been?* Was he not still his dearest friend? But Robert lay dying—was perhaps already dead. And their last meeting—

Geoffrey doggedly refused to think of that last meeting. It was a raw spot in his memory. Why should his thoughts persist in returning to it? It had nothing to do with the accident. He sat dumb and heavy-eyed, making no pretense of taking anything except a cup of strong coffee, while Ruth choked down whatever viand was offered her, though it turned to ashes on her tongue. When the meal was over she went up to Geoffrey where he still sat staring stupidly at the tablecloth.

"You are going to the rectory, aren't you?" she asked, her clear tones betraying nothing beyond concern for her idolized brother's anxiety.

## TIOGA PATH

"I will walk there with you, if you like, to bring back word about Mr. Dunbar."

Geoffrey assented drearily. Why should any one besides himself care to know how Robert was? Then with an attempt at resuming his usual manner he drew down Ruth's little soft dark face and kissed it.

"We will go at once," he said, and springing up smiled forlornly around the adoring circle, and opened the door for Ruth to pass out.

They walked to the rectory without exchanging a syllable. Some silences are rivetting bonds, but this one was a widening chasm. Neither could cross it. As they neared the house Henrietta sped away from it, her mysteriously important air proclaiming her a carrier of news. The triumphant swirl of her gown gave Geoffrey a sickening sensation as of the flutterings of a bird of prey. A doctor's buggy stood before the gate, the horse pawing impatiently at the curbstone. The man holding the reins had a depres-

## THE LETTER D

sing immovability of aspect, as if there for life. The front door stood ajar. Geoffrey went in, Ruth following. Nobody was about. He motioned her into the library while he went off upstairs. The library also was deserted, save for the St. Bernard, who sat staring gloomily at the door with the air of a royal exile awaiting recall. Ruth crossed the room to sit beside him, though he seemed unaware of her presence. He too lived in a lonely world of his own. But this is a world of separate worlds. None touch, even of those that revolve around each other.

Ruth waited breathlessly. The house was appallingly still. Death seemed already in possession. The steady scraping of the horse's hoof outside sounded like the digging of a grave. An eternity went by. Then Geoffrey returned. Ruth stood up. It is easier to meet a blow standing. He went close to her, walking with measured steps, before he spoke.

"There is no change."

## TIOGA PATH

The words sounded as if they came from some other planet. Ruth's hands tightened their clasp on each other, but she made no reply, and they went out as they had come in, leaving the dog with his eyes fastened on the open doorway. In the street they parted, Geoffrey going on to the office. But he merely gave some directions to a clerk and returned to the rectory to ask again for news. There was the one answer. No change. A uniformed nurse with a face like a madonna was now in charge, looking as if she had always been there, with all the household keys in her keeping. She recognized Geoffrey as having the right of intrusion, and motioned to him to pass into the sickroom. He set his teeth together and went in.

It was a large south chamber, with the bed in a wide alcove and the rest of the space furnished as a study. The orderliness about it gave it an unfamiliar aspect, as if Robert had gone away. Already the tables had been cleared of their litter of books and the volumes returned to the shelves

## THE LETTER D

along the northern wall, and the drawers of the typewriter desk were decorously closed upon the helter-skelter of their contents. The blinds were bowed and the shades lowered, the cool air streaming in refreshingly through the half-open windows. It seemed at first as if nobody were there. Geoffrey went farther into the room. The stillness was painful. In it he heard the stirring of the curtains. He went up to the bed, feeling as if he approached a coffin.

Robert lay there, straight and motionless, so white and indefinably altered that he seemed a waxen likeness of himself badly done. His skin was curiously shrunken, as if years had gone over him in that single night. His eyes were shut. His hands lay open along his sides. The sheet across his breast was unstirred. Nothing showed that he breathed. He might have been already dead. At the head of the bedstead sat his father, rigidly upright and almost as white as he, with a dumb agony of love in his eyes that Geoffrey could not meet. Going closer to the bed he

## TIOGA PATH

looked down at his friend for a long terrible moment, and then wheeled about abruptly and went out.

An hour later he was back, and again a few hours after that, speaking to no one, and watching with lips grimly set when the doctors or nurse laid a tentative hand on Robert's wrist or held a mirror before his bloodless lips. By the end of the day Geoffrey had ceased to expect that there would ever be any other answer than the monotonous "No change" of their report. The next day passed in the same way, and the next; and how many more? Geoffrey lost count, though Ruth could have told him the number of the hours.

His buoyant healthy nature rebelled under the strain of this interminable suspense, and at last, by way of a legitimate escape from it, he walked out to Brightborough to examine the spot of the accident and try for some clue to Robert's presence there on that Thursday night. In the absence of all proof he came away comforting him-

## THE LETTER D

self with a variety of ingenious surmises, and turned into the beautiful River Road. Presently, however, he struck off from this into Tioga Path, a footway following the river's course lower down the bluff, little frequented since the opening of the upper road with its more extended view, but better suited to his present mood. He breathed freer when he entered it. He seemed all at once to have the world to himself.

But it was not an afternoon to lure pleasure-seekers afield. The little river lay at his feet like a strip of clouded glass. No boat furrowed its blank smoothness. No Pan blew his pipes among its reeds, and the birds in the ghostly woods on its farther bank were apathetically still. The sky was opaquely grey, and seemed dropping to the earth as one looked. But the relief of the long walk had restored Geoffrey's blood to its normal strong and even flow. Some inner spring had been released. He was his active interested self again, and began to take note of the



## TIOGA PATH

small common things of wayside growth—of the bright bold dandelions, the less obvious violets, and the wind flowers shivering on their tiny raw stems as if they found the world too cold and wished themselves well out of it. Constance loved anemones. He stooped to gather some. The thought of Constance, whom he had not seen through all these horrible days, brought with it so tumultuous a longing for the touch of her hand and the sound of her voice that he felt he could not endure it another hour unappeased, and determined to stop at the Manor on his way back if but for a moment's talk.

He threw away his flowers and picked others to take her, each separate blossom as carefully chosen as were it a hothouse rose. Everything but the intensity of his longing for her was now so completely banished from his mind that it seemed the one only natural and inevitable thing that upon reaching a bend in the path he should see Constance herself just ahead of him as if conjured there in response to his desire. And at

## THE LETTER D

sight of her it was as if the sun broke forth and all the grey was gold.

In an instant he was beside her, shaken with bliss, holding out his flowers with the mingling of humility and confidence which she inspired in him. She had so little thought of meeting him that she was startled out of her composure and stood transfixed, the colour sweeping vividly from throat to brow. For the moment she, too, could not speak. Then she took his flowers and fastened them in her gown, and without other greeting they turned and walked on, taking refuge in the quickening of their steps from the acceleration of their pulses. Constance recovered herself first.

"I had no idea of meeting any one on this lonely way," she said with her wonted serenity. "But I am glad of the chance. I want to assure you of my sympathy. I know what Mr. Dunbar's illness must be to you. Is there no hope yet?"

Geoffrey turned his face sharply away. The

## TIOGA PATH

trouble of the last few days surged back in unbearable contrast to the moment's rapture.

"He still lives, at least."

His distress was so alien a thing to his brilliantly alive and joyous nature that Constance was moved by it to a rush of compassion that would not be denied expression. She silently put out her hand. Geoffrey held it an instant tightly.

"You are very good, but I can't talk about it," he said, almost petulantly, vexed at the return upon his horizon of the banished cloud. "I have thought of nothing else since the accident. Mayn't I forget it for these few blessed moments? I seem to have been dead all these past days. Do let me live for a time. You must. Fate has given me this one hour."

His eyes brightened as he looked at her. She wore a soft green gown a shade deeper than the young leaves that made her background, and a large hat of a still deeper tint lay upon her gold hair like a curled leaf upon a flower. She might have been a dryad strayed from her forest

## THE LETTER D

to meet him, the freshness of a spring morning in her face and the blue of a summer twilight in her eyes. Geoffrey's blitheness came magically back to him, and again Constance yielded to it as to a constraining spell.

"There is enough to talk of besides," she acquiesced. "First of all there is your book—my book. I am its foster-mother in a way, you know, if, as you told me, I am its inspiration. I have a right of interest in its development. I am getting shamefully impatient to see it. Of course, though, you can have written nothing since I last saw you."

Geoffrey came to a halt, and stooping over, carefully removed an infinitesimal spear of grass entangled in his shoe-lace. It was a full minute before he straightened himself up and walked on again. "No, of course not," he replied at last reluctantly. He hesitated, choosing his words. How could he best tell her that he had destroyed her book on the eve of its completion?—that it was all to begin over again, and this time with-

## TIOGA PATH

out a vestige of hope to spur him on? How could he best undeceive her once for all?

He turned to her desperately. "Miss Pruyn, why have you set me such an impossible task? What can it matter to you whether I write or not? Haven't you guessed by now how far I am from your idea of me?"

Constance waited some little time before answering, looking down at the dull bit of river at their feet, her profile showing purely against the grey atmosphere like a cameo set in mother-of-pearl. "Whatever I may think of you, I ask you only to enter into the full heritage of your possibilities," she finally said.

"How can you gauge my possibilities?" he broke out impetuously. "Why won't you be contented with me as I am? Could I possibly love you more, though I had the world at my feet?"

She threw back her beautiful head and looked at him with one of the sweet rare smiles which set his heart aflame.

## THE LETTER D

“You could prove your love by bringing it there—for my sake.”

It was the first time that the word love had been spoken between them, but so long had it been in their hearts that neither noticed its use. Words, after all, bear but the smallest part in any love-confession.

“I had not thought you so ambitious,” Geoffrey said, bringing his auburn brows close in a pained frown. “I thought—”

She interrupted him.

“I am not urging you to any material rewards. Can you fancy I would have so ignoble an aim for you? It is the gain to yourself that I want, the mental growth, the development that comes only through the toil of one’s brain. Outward success is worthless except as it proves that spiritual success which is everything. I am ambitious for you not only to hint at what is in you, but to attain to it—to become it. That is the way I am ambitious—for those I—”

## TIOGA PATH

She broke off confusedly, seized all of a moment with an exquisite embarrassment.

Geoffrey's brow cleared as by magic. He came close and took her hand.

"Finish your sentence, Constance! Say—  
'for those I love'!"

His tone, passionate and triumphant, made the use of her name seem a permitted caress. Her hand trembled, but she yielded it to his, and they walked on so for a brief space, hand in hand like affianced lovers, unable to speak for the tumult of joy that was in them. Presently the path curved inward from the river round a great boulder, behind which the bank had hollowed itself out into a natural arbour, with the spreading branches of a hemlock for a roof, and a fallen tree at its farther side for a seat. As they came into the seclusion of the leaf-hung little place, Geoffrey paused.

"Dear, why do you not answer me?" he said softly, bending toward her. "Why do you not say what I tell you to? I know it without your

## THE LETTER D

saying it. I should know it though you denied it. But say it, Constance! Say it!"

She loosened her hand instantly, though gently, not in reproof, and moved a few feet away.

"To say it means too much," she answered slowly, more than her usual gravity returning to her face. "It means more than I am prepared to grant you—yet."

Geoffrey did not attempt to lessen the distance she had placed between them, but stood looking at her confidently across it.

"And why not now? Why waste a day? What is there to wait for? I love you with my whole being. You know it. You have always known it. Years of waiting could not add to it nor take from it. What is there to wait for?"

"Just this," Constance said, with sudden passionate earnestness. "The certainty that we should be happy together."

Geoffrey laughed out jubilantly.

"Happy? Is not that precisely the one cer-



## TIOGA PATH

tainty that we have—that we shall be happy—divinely happy—happier than any two mortals have ever been since the world began? Were any two ever before such halves of one whole? Is not each the other's unmistakable complement? How could we keep apart if we would? God's own law of affinity brought us together. We belong together. We are each other—I am you, you are I. Did not each recognize that from the first? How soon will you marry me, Constance? I can't wait! I won't wait!"

"You must wait," Constance said, a deep trouble in her face. "I must be surer of you first."

"Surer of my love?"

"No. No. Surer of you—that you are what I think you—surer that you are not one to content yourself with 'a few herbs and apples' when you might have kingdoms and stars—perhaps even 'the sky that holds them all.' I could not bear again in you what I have borne all these

## THE LETTER D

years. Oh, you cannot guess the misery I have lived through!"

"Misery?" Geoffrey repeated blankly. Then he laughed again, flinging back his head and tossing out his arms in a gesture of infectious joyousness. "Misery? There is no such word in the vocabulary for you and me. There is only happiness, and its synonyms. Your past has nothing to do with our future. If you have been unhappy, the more reason that you should give me the right to make you forget it. I will force you to forget it. You shall never remember it again. What are you afraid of, Constance?"

"Afraid of you," she answered, with an agitated smile, moving farther away and passing behind the fallen tree where she stood steadying herself by holding to its feathered branches. She might have been a Daphne fleeing from Apollo. "Don't look at me. I can't think clearly while you do. Be sensible. Realize that this is a life question. How can we settle it in

## TIOGA PATH

an instant? We are not children, to yield to impulse—to mere feeling.”

“Mere feeling!” Geoffrey echoed hotly. “Is that what you call this suffocating thing that is filling every vein of me—tearing at every nerve? The question is already settled for all time for both of us. What is there to weigh words about? We love each other. We are each other. Let us be so openly. Why delay?”

“If only I could explain!” Constance said, seating herself sideways on the trunk, and looking up at him with eyes full of uncertainty and pain. “Be patient. Perhaps I can make you understand. You are so like my father—like what every one says he was. And I could not bear it if you altered as he has. Don’t think me disloyal. I do not mean to blame him. Enough others do that. I love him with all my heart—love him so that it is torture to watch him change. He had only one fault—lack of ambition—but everything came from that. He was satisfied with life’s outward easy pleasantnesses,

## THE LETTER D

and asked nothing more than to be liked and to enjoy himself. He saw no need for any personal effort. He was situated as you are. He did not have to work. But later, when he lost his fortune, it galled him to live on my mother's—galled him unspeakably when she died to accept the little that my grandfather made it possible for me to give him. And then—" she faltered.

"Don't tell me this, please!" Geoffrey remonstrated. "It hurts you too much. I can't stand it."

"Then—" Constance went on insistently, putting by his interruption, "when it was too late, he wanted to prove himself equal to life's demands and carve out his own place in the world. But by then he had unfitted himself for work. Ambition then was only a rack. He had no perseverance, no intellectual industry, no sort of power of application. It was disappointment after disappointment, failure after failure. Men began to speak of him pityingly

## TIOGA PATH

—slightingly. And under the ordeal his character changed. He has grown the reverse of everything that he was. He is bitter, irritable, cynical, morose—miserably unhappy. Living with him has been—” Again she faltered, but she forced herself to composure and went on. “There is no need to speak of that. It is not that that I mind. It is the seeing him alter. He was so dear—so lovely! If we were both poor—could work and try together— Oh, it is horrible to have had every luxury all my life long and to be limited only in giving to him! I have come to hate money. I despise it. The having it is a mere accident—not a matter of desert. Don’t you see now why I set such value upon talent? Talent at least cannot be withheld or bequeathed. It is not an inheritance. It is God-given. It belongs to the individual by his own inalienable right. I prize it above anything on earth. If only my father had had talent—if he had had what you have—”

## THE LETTER D

Geoffrey had stood listening uncomfortably, alternately frowning and biting his lip. Now he broke into a harsh laugh.

"The talent that I have!" he said bitterly. "What if I *know*—if I have *proved* that I have none?"

Constance laughed, too, unexpectedly, in reply—a laugh full of a deep and satisfying conviction. He had never heard her laugh out before. It was like low music. Yet he sickened as he heard it.

"Don't you know that I will not allow you to say that you have no talent—still less to think it?" she said.

Geoffrey drew in his breath sharply. "But—"

"Think no buts," she interrupted quickly. "Feel sure of success. That is half the battle. Geoffrey—" it was the first time she had ever called him so. It sounded in his ears like a song. She suddenly rose and came up to him with both hands out. "Geoffrey, give me my one proof—the only proof I ask! Finish your book!"

## TIOGA PATH

At the inflection of her tone and the look on her face, everything fell away from Geoffrey but the consciousness of her nearness and of his love for her. He was a primeval lover alone in a primeval Eden with the one living Eve of his desire. Without knowing what he did he caught her by the arms and drew her to him.

"I would give you my heart's blood!" he cried passionately over her. "There is nothing under heaven that I would not do for you! My life is yours. All that I have and am is yours. My very soul is yours. Do what you will with me. I love you—love you! Kiss me, Constance!"

He bent down his head blindly. But before their lips touched, Constance disengaged herself and moved out of his reach.

"Not yet," she said softly, with a look that was both a prohibition and a consent.

Geoffrey strode up to her, restraining himself with a mighty effort from snatching her to his breast.

## THE LETTER D

“Constance, when?” he asked. “When?”

His eyes dwelt on hers, imperative, entreating, adoring. Her own fell. Her colour went and came, and went again. She stood for a moment’s space, her head thrown back, her arms hanging by her side, thrilled to the heart of her with the sweetness of this half surrender.

“When you give me your book,” she said then, very low, but very distinctly. The colour flashed once more over her face; she gave him a glance full of a new and delicious trouble, and with an imperious gesture that forbade him to follow, disappeared around the curve of the path leading to the town.



## CHAPTER XI

### *DEATH IN LIFE*

Let the end try the man.

HENRY IV.

GEOFFREY did not attempt to follow. He stood where Constance had left him, stirred to the depths of his large-hearted passionate nature. It was some minutes before he moved. Then he crossed the path to the fallen tree and sat down upon it, resting his elbows on his knees and dropping his chin into his hands, his eyes fixed unseeingly on the brown lacework of lichens covering the breadth of the boulder.

Oh, the rapture of knowing—knowing positively—that she loved him! There had been no element of doubt to torture him until that awful

## THE LETTER D

night over Robert's book, when the first suspicion of uncertainty had stolen poisonously into his mind. But there was no mistaking her words now, her look, her agitated demeanour. Yes, she loved him! Only—under what conditions? What impossible proof of his love had she demanded? Something which had seemed not at all impossible in that ecstatic moment when he held her in his arms. Nothing had seemed beyond him then. With the gift of her love as an Excalibur in his hands, he had felt himself transformed into a king of lovers, magically armed to conquer her the universe at a word.

But what token had she demanded? No great thing. He was not to imperil his life for her sake. She asked no drop of his blood, shed in knightly devotion. What had she asked? A little unimportant worthless thing—a book of his own making; just the one thing in all the world that he could not give her though he died for it.

## DEATH IN LIFE

He sprang up and walked to and fro across the tiny arbour'd space, turning and returning desperately as if penned in there behind impassable bars. Oh, the curse of mediocrity of power, combined with super-excellence of aim! Why could he not do this thing? Where did he fall short of the required outfit? Not in perseverance. He could work with the best. Ambition? He was mad with it. Imagination? He smiled angrily. He had too much imagination, a riotous imagination, of the unruly, unbridled, ungovernable sort, that did what it pleased and nothing that he pleased, that ran away with him and brought him nowhere, except, crippled, to the ground. Nor was it paucity of language. On the contrary, his vocabulary swamped him. He found so many words to express his thought that he could not choose among them—did not know which to leave out—and so used them all, till every noun became an engine dragging along an interminable number of heterogeneous adjectival freight cars, and for the life of him

## THE LETTER D

he did not know which to uncouple from the rest. How different from Robert's style!

Pshaw! Why was his critical sense of no use applied to his own work? Why could he see clearly only when looking away from himself? If it was so easy to criticize, why was it so impossible to produce? Was perception of just values not a part of the creative instinct? It was maddening! What did he lack? A discriminating sense of proportion, fineness of observation, nicety of expression, forcefulness of presentation. These were pure tools of the trade, quite apart from the material they wrought upon, but they were not to be had for the mere recognition of their need. As to the material, there again what did he lack? Just that excellence of selection which fixes intuitively upon the theme best fitted to the limitations and faculties of the writer—talent. That was all he lacked—talent, Robert's talent. If Constance could compare only a single page of Robert's book with his— But he had no book

## DEATH IN LIFE

to show her. He had nothing to show as a result of the inspiration she had been to him, except a heap of ashes. Now was he to begin it all over again? How had Robert begun his?

With a jerk of the shoulders as if breaking through an obstacle, he left the odorous hemlock arbour and retraced his way along Tioga Path. How grey and dull everything was—the lifeless river, the motionless trees, and the dense close sky with its monotonous sweep. He snapped off a willow branch that brushed his arm, and stripping it of its tender leaves, struck it impatiently against his forehead as he walked. If but he could beat ideas into himself so! Whence could he get ideas? But they should not be extraneous. They should be part and parcel of his brain, waiting like prisoners to be released by the mere turning of a key. No, not so easily, either. Alas for that “fatal facility!” Only through travail and pain can any great birth ever come to pass, even though it spring, Minerva-like, full-clad and perfect from the

## THE LETTER D

brain. So must it have been with Robert's book. Ah, what a book to have conceived! When Robert got well and published it—poor fellow, if he got well! And if not—? It was something to live for, a reason to recover, if only to bring out such a book as that. It would make a furor. When Constance read it she would know that it was Robert, not talentless Geoffrey, whom she loved. She would know that she had merely mistaken the names.

Again that sensation of jealous hate struck through him like a hot blast, withering his old affection down to the roots. He flung away the willow branch, viciously, as if it were a missile hurled at an enemy. Ah, there was vastly more than the book for Robert to recover for! And if he did not recover—

Geoffrey broke off another branch. He could not quiet his restless hands. They must have something to occupy them—the miserable hands that could not wield a pen. Had he Robert's pen— Had the book been his, not Robert's—

## DEATH IN LIFE

If Robert had willed it to him, to be his, to do what he chose with— And why not? Was a book—one's own book—unlike any other valuable possession, something to will away in the end? Of what earthly use could his book be to Robert—if he died?

Geoffrey had followed the path its entire length. Now it came unpremeditatedly to an end, running out into the river as if there were nothing more to do but to walk in and drown oneself. Geoffrey looked down the long sleepy stretch of winding water to where it lost itself around a jutting hill. Yes, always there was something in the way. No river ran straight to its very end. Yet the end was always reached. When there were hills—mountains, even—one went round them, one made a path, created a way. It was not the way that mattered, but reaching the end. Once out in the broad, bright, open spaces of the sea, who counted the twists and narrows of the river?

But how was he to make a way? Robert had

## THE LETTER D

left him nothing upon which to begin. It was an infernal trick that Robert had played him. Robert had stolen Constance from him, making her the glory of his book—Constance, his promised wife, his all but bride! Every one, reading the story not knowing that it was Robert's, would take it for granted that it was Geoffrey's. The whole town was agog for his book, while no one expected anything of Robert. No one had any inkling that Robert wrote. No one would be disappointed if Robert's book never saw the light, or if—

Well, if Robert died, what difference could anything make to him? The loss of Constance, the loss of his book, the loss of fame—what of any of it counted to the man who had lost life? That one loss included all. Nothing belongs any more to the man who dies. His last breath is the giving up of the citadel of his rights. Let the living rush in. All is theirs now that was his. He has abdicated in their favour.

Geoffrey turned and walked slowly back the



## DEATH IN LIFE

way he had come. The grey day was greyer yet as it sank to its close. It was strangely lonely in that deserted path by the river's edge. His deliberate footsteps, echoing from the rocky bank as if he had an invisible follower, emphasized the loneliness. He paused again. To walk alone with one's thoughts is sometimes to be in a ghastly company. Turning abruptly to the bluff that rose sheer above his head, he grasped the branch of an out-growing tree and swung himself a few feet up, caught at another higher bough, found a footing here or there on a bit of projecting rock or in a gnarled root, and so scrambled up and out to the River Road, where he emerged, flushed and triumphant, to the open-mouthed astonishment of a passing waggoner. Yes, one could always make a way!

It was late before he reached Red Roofs. As he passed through its gates, a tiny figure slipped out from a shrubbery-hidden side path.

"O Geoff, what more news?"

Geoffrey drew Ruth's hand through his arm.

## THE LETTER D

“How nice of you to come to meet me! News? Why I could find no reason for Rob’s being at Brightborough that night. Still—”

Ruth caught at his sleeve.

“You have not been to the rectory?”

“No. I came back by the River Road and Carlton Street.”

She gave a little cry.

“Then you don’t know—”

Geoffrey went suddenly white. He loosened his arm from hers and faced her in the path.

“Robert is dead?” he asked, in a voice so unlike his own that it seemed scarcely his, and all his old love for his friend leaped up in him and strangled him, as with fingers pressing at his throat. Can expectation of a disaster bring about its fulfilment? For the moment Geoffrey felt that he had murdered Robert. He broke out in a cold sweat of horror.

“No, no, not dead—not that!” Ruth cried sharply. “He has moved—spoken—he has been conscious all the afternoon. But—”

## DEATH IN LIFE

“Moved? *Conscious?*” Geoffrey exclaimed, and in his revulsion of feeling as the weight rolled from him he shouted aloud like a school-boy. “Hurrah! Hurrah! He will be asking for me. I must be there.” And before the words were out he was half way down the street.

Robert alive! Robert himself again! The afternoon’s nightmare vanished like a miasmatic fog before the sun. His soul yearned to his friend as Jonathan’s yearned to David. He was so illumined by joy that every one whom he met looked back at him, wondering what good thing had come to him. He reached the rectory in a trice, and went in at its door and up its stairway like a whirlwind, bursting into the sickroom simultaneously with his knock.

“Rob—Rob—old chap!”

But just inside the door he stopped short with a half-framed apology. Two consultants, men whose faces bespoke their ability, the madonna-eyed nurse and Dr. Dunbar were standing about

## THE LETTER D

the bed, all of them singularly grave. Geoffrey would instantly have withdrawn, but at sound of his voice Dr. Dunbar turned quickly, and springing toward him caught him by the arm.

“Come! Try! Perhaps you—his dearest friend—” And he drew Geoffrey forcibly forward, the others making way.

Geoffrey drew a breath of relief as he, too, looked down at the bed. The figure lying there was no longer merely the simulacrum of itself. A mysterious change had passed over it, a change as great as death, but betokening death’s withdrawal. Robert was alive once more, a breathing, sentient, human thing, through whose veins the blood coursed visibly, and whose face had won back youth. He lay, not stretched out straight and still as before, but turned over on his side and curled up comfortably, every limb flexed as if for rest after the long tension. His eyes were closed. Geoffrey thought him asleep.

“How good to see him so!” he said in a de-

## DEATH IN LIFE

lighted undertone to Dr. Dunbar. "How good to get him back!"

The father drew in his breath like one stabbed with physical pain, and motioned Geoffrey nearer.

"Speak to him. Rouse him. Make him answer you."

Geoffrey bent down, wondering.

"Bob! dear old pal—Bob!" he called softly, and receiving no reply, at a sign from one of the surgeons he took Robert's hand and drew it toward him. It was resentfully withdrawn, and unclosing his eyes Robert looked full into the eager face beside his own. "Bob!" Geoffrey murmured again, his voice thrilled with affection.

Robert's dark brilliant eyes, absolutely sane, absolutely cognizant, looked into his for a long moment, but with no smallest sign of recognition. Then they closed again impatiently. It was as if before them all he denounced acquaintance with his friend. Geoffrey stood up, flush-

## THE LETTER D

ing crimson. What freak of anger or dislike had Robert found it worth while to bring back with him from the borders of the grave?

Dr. Dunbar was watching intently. The man was metamorphosed. His lifelong reserve had broken down, and he was in a state of nervous agitation and distress which he made no effort to conceal. He laid his hand imperatively on Geoffrey's shoulder.

"Try again! Do not be routed so quickly! Force him to know you! Father in Heaven, am I to have him back only like this? My boy! My boy!" And giving way altogether, he fell on his knees by the bed, hiding his face in its coverings and breaking into convulsive soundless sobs.

Robert opened his eyes again, puckering his brows fretfully.

"What ails him?" he asked peevishly. "Who is he? Take him away!"

"Rob!" Geoffrey exclaimed, confounded. "You will break your father's heart!"

## DEATH IN LIFE

“Father?” Robert repeated dully. “Have I a father?”

Rousing more fully, he looked at Geoffrey again. Then his gaze, wholly conscious and rational, yet as blank of recollection as an infant’s, passed slowly from Geoffrey to the others. Each spoke to him in turn, but to no purpose.

“I do not know any of you,” he said petulantly. “Why are you here? I do not want you.” Turning his head he looked all about the room like one awakened in unknown surroundings. “Where am I? What place is this?”

The nurse leaned over him, her eyes dim with pity. “This is your own home, Mr. Dunbar, your own room. Don’t you recognize it? It has always been your room. Those are your books—your pictures. That is your desk.”

Robert turned his eyes upon her in silence, then closed them and lay thinking deeply, while the watchers held their breath. Again he raised his lids, and his soul looked out despairingly

## THE LETTER D

into the terrible new world into which he found himself so mysteriously reborn.

"You call me Mr. Dunbar, and Robert," he said helplessly. "Is that who I am? I can't think who I was. Have I died?"

The door of the room had been left ajar. Now it flew wide, and the St. Bernard sprang in, leaping toward the bed in a frenzy of delight at refinding his master. Geoffrey attempted to drag the dog away, but the great animal resisted all efforts at removal and stood half over Robert, his monstrous fore-paws firmly planted on the bed, uttering short, sharp, ecstatic barks, his body quivering from head to tail. Robert stared in wonder at the frantic creature, then his glance wandered helplessly around the group.

"Does the dog know me? How can it know me? I do not know myself," he said piteously, and putting his hands to his head, he burst into weak tears.

The nurse bent over him soothingly, but in-



## DEATH IN LIFE

stantly Dr. Dunbar was on his feet, calm and ready, and gently putting her aside, he stooped and kissed his son's cheek. An infinite tenderness, blended with ineffable love and compassion, made his face almost divine.

Geoffrey could endure no more. If this were a return to life, what was death? An ungovernable impatience took possession of him. He appealed tempestuously to the doctors.

"What has come to him? Has he forgotten everything? When will he remember?"

The older of the two men turned his keen piercing eyes a moment from his patient's face to Geoffrey's.

"Only God knows," he answered quietly. "Perhaps never. We cannot tell."

Geoffrey looked at him, stupefied. Then with a sound between a groan and a sob, he flung himself out of the room.

## CHAPTER XII

### *THE ENIGMA OF A NAME*

The flighty purpose never is o’ertook  
Unless the deed go with it.

MACBETH.

It was an afternoon a month later, and Ruth was walking down Elm Street in an aimless fashion very unlike her usual alert gait, when a voice arrested her.

“Here! Here! Come in here!”

She paused and glanced toward the open window whence the call issued, and obeying a peremptorily waved lace curtain, leisurely crossed the broad street and entered the house. She found Miss McIntyre in her drawing-room on a *chaise-longue* drawn up by one of the front windows. The old lady, with whom ease and

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

durability were the chief essentials in dress, was arrayed in a man's dark blue smoking jacket over a green satin petticoat, her swollen feet unabashedly proclaiming their infirmities in loose brown felt slippers. Ruth paused uncertainly, discovering three callers seated beside Miss McIntyre in attitudes oppressively suggestive of permanence.

"Oh, you are not alone?"

"Why should I want you if I were?" asked Miss McIntyre tartly. "To be alone is not the worst of evils. To be lonely when not alone is a worse one." She glanced vindictively at her guests, a commonplace, stout woman, with disintegrated eyebrows and a white soft chin like a powder-puff, and two excellently well matched young girls. "Come in. I haven't seen you for an age of blue-devils." She gave Ruth a look of very real affection as she pulled her down to kiss her. "Don't excuse yourself, child. An excuse is generally only a disguised lie. Have you your purse, my dear? I am raising a sub-

## THE LETTER D

scription for a poor fellow—as honest and good a carpenter as there is in town—who has been ill and is out of work. I want thirty-five dollars for him, and I need ten to make it up. Mrs. Trotter unfortunately has left her purse at home. Such an idiotic thing to do—to go out without your purse. You would like to help the poor man, I know, Ruth. You have a talent for doing the duty that lies next. Only three dollars with you? That is better than nothing, and you can bring me more later. I will see that he gets it. One of the hardest things connected with my limited means is knowing people in want and not being able to help them.”

Mrs. Trotter cast an appraising glance around the luxurious room.

“Limited means is a relative term,” she remarked, in a voice such as might be expected from a pouter pigeon.

“Everything is relative,” Miss McIntyre rejoined, putting on the tired look with which she usually shortened unwelcome visits. “You need

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

not pity a man, for instance, for being unable to live on partridge if he prefers to live on pork. It is the easiest thing in the world to economize for some one else, and the hardest to do it for oneself. But to put the matter compactly, luxury is living on a scale of ten thousand a year with an income of twenty thousand, and poverty is living on a scale of twenty thousand with an income of ten thousand. Trying to make a dollar do duty for two is belittling, soul-stultifying, tiresome and unchristianly. I won't do it." She shut her mouth with a snap as if it were a steel purse. "Therefore I get my wealthy friends to help out my charities. It is good for their souls, and saves my pennies. What is the news, Ruth? These stupid girls either see nothing, or haven't the wit to tell it."

"Mr. Dunbar is well again," hastily put in one of the victims, anxious to disprove the calumny. "But Dr. Holmes thinks he will never recover his memory."

"How should a chit like you know what Dr.

## THE LETTER D

Holmes or any one else thinks?" returned Miss McIntyre crushingly. "You wouldn't know a thought if you saw one. It is no news that the boy has back his health. Henrietta saw him the other day when I sent to ask Dr. Dunbar to put a stop to those early service chimes. That is the only hour of the twenty-four when I ever close my eyes. She said he seemed quite himself except that he did not know her. And it looks bad not to know Henrietta, considering that next to the postman she is the most ubiquitous person in town."

"I saw Mr. Dunbar, too, yesterday," added the younger Miss Trotter, eager to contribute her mite. "He was standing near the gate. But he did not know me, either."

"What an extraordinary Providence it all is!" sighed Mrs. Trotter. "Life is full of mysteries."

Miss McIntyre had toward all platitudes that healthy antipathy which ordinary persons feel toward a snake. "No, it is not," she retorted.

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

“There are but two mysterious things about life—how it begins, and why it ends. All the rest is simple enough.”

“But is it true that Mr. Dunbar remembers no one?” inquired the younger Miss Trotter, torn between timidity and inquisitiveness.

“Have you seen him, Ruth?”

“How should I?” The answer sounded so curt in her own ears that Ruth tried to soften it. “I rarely pass the rectory when I am out,” she added quite gently.

“He has not called at Red Roofs then? Your brother and he are so intimate—”

“Why should he want to call anywhere?” Ruth interrupted, and again her voice sounded curiously harsh to herself. “We are all strangers to him now, you know, Arabella; Geoffrey is no more to him than your brother or any one else.”

“There he is!” exclaimed Miss McIntyre, parting the curtains. “His father is taking him for a walk. I hope I got ahead of Henrietta

## THE LETTER D

for once and saw him first! But I don't doubt she is at an upper window this minute. She lives at the windows!"

Mrs. Trotter pursed up her little pudgy mouth. "How the poor fellow must hate to show himself in the street!"

"And why, pray?" inquired Miss McIntyre. "Is he to be a snail for the rest of his life, going no farther from his house than to its doorstep? I will make him see me at any rate. How do you do? How do you do? Come in, won't you?"

Dr. Dunbar was walking beside his son, lovingly watchful, and pointing out to him the various homes of his friends as if to a stranger in the city, while Robert, docile and uninterested, walked straight ahead, observant of nothing, and speaking only when he must. The raised voice attracted Dr. Dunbar's attention as he caught sight of two approaching acquaintances whom he nervously preferred to avoid, and he hastily responded to Miss McIntyre's sum-



## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

mons. He was considerably disturbed, however, upon entering her room with Robert, to find so many there. But after a scarcely perceptible hesitation, he bravely advanced to the *chaise-longue*, and took Miss McIntyre's frail outstretched hand.

"These are all old friends, Robert," he said, turning to his son so naturally as to rob the occasion of any possible awkwardness. "You must know them again, beginning of course with Miss McIntyre."

Robert bowed gravely to the bright old eyes bent upon him, and greeted Miss Trotter and her daughters in turn as his father named them. Ruth had instinctively withdrawn to one side upon the entrance of the Dunbars, and stood half hidden by a rosewood bookcase, her heart beating wildly. She had not dared try to see Robert before. But now the crucial moment was upon her, and without warning. The first meeting, that all these weary weeks through she had pictured to herself over and again, was

## THE LETTER D

unavoidably thrust upon her, and differently from any way in which she had imagined it. She had always thought of seeing Robert alone—never with others by like this. Surely it could not be possible that he would not recognize her—if but her out of all the world. Surely the first sight of her face would bring everything back—he would remember their last walk in the dusk and the few words that had bound her to him for all time, no matter what calamity had since come to him. Surely, though he had forgotten all else, he must remember that night.

Quite suddenly she moved out of the shadow and stood before them all in front of Robert, not speaking, but lifting her eyes to his with an agony of expectation in their clear depths that troubled him strangely. He looked speechlessly from her to his father. It was a cry for help. Dr. Dunbar responded instantly.

“O Miss Doane, pardon me. I had not seen you. Robert, this is Miss Doane, you know.”

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

Ruth did not move her eyes from Robert's uncomprehending face.

"No, no, not Miss Doane," she said breathlessly. "I am not Miss Doane. Edith is Miss Doane. I am Ruth Doane, Ruth—Ruth."

Robert looked at her dully. Why did she so insist upon her name? What had his father told him of the Doanes? It was chiefly about Geoffrey. His troubled gaze wandered over Ruth's face. What was it that she expected of him? What was it that she thought her name should recall to him? He looked toward his father anxiously.

"Is this Geoffrey Doane's wife?" he ventured timidly, unsure of his ground.

A flood of hot colour rushed over Ruth's face, wetting her lids with stinging drops. The room swam around her. She bit her lips to keep back a hysterical sob.

"Dear me, no; Ruth is Geoffrey's sister. He will never get half so decent a wife," declared Miss McIntyre briskly. "Moreover I doubt if

## THE LETTER D

he gets one at all. He is far too busy writing a novel. Haven't they told you of his novel? We can't any of us find anything better to discuss, unless it is the weather. Sit down here by me, Robert. I will tell you about it, while your father entertains those foolish girls." And in the merciful confusion incident upon the moving of chairs and refinding of places, Ruth slipped unperceived from the room.

When soon after the Dunbars rose to take their leave, Robert missed her.

"I did not see Miss Ruth Doane go," he observed apologetically as he shook hands with the others, addressing each by name quite distinctly to prove how well his new memory served him. Then he followed Dr. Dunbar dutifully out of the room, leaving the three visitors immovably fixed as before, despite the "For-heaven's-sake-go!" look plainly written on their hostess' inhospitable features.

Upon reaching the street, Robert turned to his father perplexedly.

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

"Was there any one among those people whom I used to know especially well?—any one whom I should have greeted differently? You are to be my mentor in all such difficulties as they crop up, you know."

Dr. Dunbar found great solace in this new child-like dependence upon him, and in the knowledge that he held the key to the sealed book of Robert's past and could turn its pages at need. His yearning tenderness over his son was no longer repressed and self-contained, but showed in every line of his face and filled his voice to overflowing.

"No, my dear boy, no," he answered, heartily glad to be able conscientiously to remove the vague distress from Robert's face. "There is no one in Wendover, as far as I know, except Geoffrey Doane, for whom you had any particular friendship. You were as exclusive and as solitary as I. Make your mind easy. You were impartially polite to them all just now, and no-

## THE LETTER D

body has the right to expect more than ordinary courtesy from you."

Robert was satisfied and said no more. All the same Ruth's strange look—the look that nobody but himself had seen—dwelt disturbingly in his mind, and wherever he went afterward he watched for her, wondering if he should see that look again.

But Ruth took pains that they should not meet. She could not subject herself to so intolerable a hurt a second time. This living death which had come between them was worse than if Robert had actually died. Now there was not even a grave. There was nothing except that cruelly sore spot in her heart that must heal over as it could. For all of life was still to live, and nothing could ever be any different for her from what it was now, since Robert was never to recover. Oh, how infinitely much more courage it takes to face life than to face death!

But what did Robert Dunbar's loss of memory signify? argued the greater part of his

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

world. The getting reacquainted with his townspeople would be a pleasant experience. His friends would have the charm of novelty for him twice over. Nothing was really changed for him. He could even resume his work in his office. It was only places and people, not his book learning, that had gone from him. He was a man without a past, that was all, and to lose one's past should be a trifle to him who still has the future. Indeed, many would deem it an inestimable blessing to blot out all their disagreeable recollections at a go and start in fresh with a clean, clear page—so said Robert's friends, with that facility for seeing the silver lining to other people's clouds, which even the most near-sighted possess.

So Robert gradually took up life with little outward difference, except an increased aloofness of bearing from which he found it impossible to free himself. A door had closed upon all that he had hitherto thought and felt and lived, and wherever he turned a blank wall confronted

## THE LETTER D

and silenced him. His refined delicate face had lost none of its intelligence, but its keenness and sparkle had given place to a diffidence, which combined with his docile and hesitating manner, gave him something of the appealing quality of a gentle child.

Geoffrey, despite his efforts, had been unable to renew his former relations with Robert, though out of deference to the tradition of his past, Robert acquiesced in an outward intimacy which in a way concealed the fact that its reality was over for them both.

“Rob might better have died,” Geoffrey caught himself saying as he opened his office desk, inside of which lay that bulky package addressed to himself. “He will never be the same again. In point of fact, he has died. He is dead.”

Robert, of course, remembered nothing about his book, and Geoffrey said to himself that for the present, at least, it was best not to speak of it. That one spurt of genius had been Robert’s



## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

first and last. He would never write again. Then why should the greatness of his loss be brought home to him? It would be but a needless pain. And there was no one except Geoffrey to inflict it on him. That typewritten copy locked away in Geoffrey's private desk was the sole vestige of whatever preliminary labour there might have been. There was no first draft nor smallest note left. Of that Geoffrey had been assured simply enough, Dr. Dunbar having requested him to look over all his son's papers, both at the office and rectory, that no business might be neglected. Law papers were there in plenty, and in a confusion trying to Geoffrey's orderly soul, but there was not a scrap of anything else. Robert looked on apathetically while his belongings were thus ransacked.

"I don't know in the least what is here," he said. "These cases that you speak of are absolutely new to me. I shall have to study them up again from the start. You are good to take so much trouble for me."

## THE LETTER D

That never failing gratitude of Robert's for the least service done him was extremely touching, but Geoffrey found it unbearable. What would be Robert's feeling could he look into his friend's heart? To some natures the craving for happiness is as intense as the toper's thirst for his dram, and the foregoing of it as intolerable a physical anguish, and Geoffrey was conscious now of nothing beyond his consuming love for Constance Pruyn, and his passionate resolve to win her.

But the winning of Constance seemed farther than ever. Nothing came of his repeated efforts to write, except an intolerable disgust with the result. All the time every one was asking about his book. Was it not nearly done? Would they not have it soon? His evasive replies only whetted their curiosity the more. Constance alone never inquired as to its progress. To do so, now that it admittedly stood for so much, would have been to acknowledge an impatience incompatible with her womanly dignity. Yet

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

Geoffrey sometimes thought that he read the question in her eyes, and it maddened him when he did.

“What toil goes to the making of a book!”

Robert commented one day as he strolled into the office just as Geoffrey impatiently tore a finished page in two. “I admire your perseverance.”

Geoffrey threw down his pen and glanced up sharply.

“Why? What do you know about it? Are you writing one yourself, perhaps?”

Robert laughed gently—a laugh that it hurt to hear, for the sadness in it.

“No, indeed. Books are the outcome of accumulated individual experiences. How could I write a story, I, who am back at the beginning of everything like a twice-born child? Do you realize that what we do not remember is, for us, at least, as if it had never been? What should I make a story of?”

Geoffrey got up and began pacing the floor.

## THE LETTER D

It was after business hours, and they had the rooms to themselves.

"A novel is by no means necessarily an autobiography," he said, rather harshly. "Why shouldn't you write one if you want to?"

"I do not want to," Robert replied simply. "I should find no imaginative work as interesting as speculating about myself, wondering what manner of man I was before I became what I am. It is as if I were reading a last chapter first and puzzling out the previous story from it, which is vastly more of a riddle than guessing the end from the first chapter."

Geoffrey's uneasy walk came to a stop.

"Robert—do you chance to remember anything about a novel called 'The Requital'?" He threw out the words in a flash, to get them spoken before the courage to say them forsook him. His brows contracted as he named the book.

Robert shook his head unconcernedly.

"I read no novels."

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

Geoffrey dashed his hand across his forehead. It was cold and clammy.

"I have it. And—it would pay you to listen to it."

He pulled forward an armchair; then recollecting that it was the same in which he had sat out that horrible night, pushed it aside and wheeled up another. "Here. Sit down and smoke while I read it. I want your opinion."

"Pshaw! What value has my opinion now?"

Geoffrey had gone to his desk and was fumbling inside it. He glanced back at Robert suspiciously, but Robert was not watching. Geoffrey's hand was unsteady. He took out the pile of quarto sheets from the wrapper and returned with it to Robert. His voice was unsteady, too.

"What you will say means—everything. Look, Rob. Try and remember. Don't you recall this?"

He brandished the title page before Robert's

## THE LETTER D

eyes. Must not those staring black letters re-awaken his slumbering memory?

“What is it?” Robert asked indifferently. “Your story? Why didn’t you say so?” He endeavoured politely to feign the expected interest. “Is it finished? I supposed you still at work on it.”

Geoffrey looked about for a chair and seated himself. There was a strange look on the face that heretofore had been so open and unashamed.

“This is finished,” he replied at last, very slowly, halting between each word. “It is ready, as it stands, for publication. See if—if you remember it at all.”

Robert sighed wearily.

“Why on earth should I pick out just your story to remember out of the lot that I have let go? Well, never mind. Read ahead.”

He threw himself back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his neck, and his eyes fastened absently on the ceiling, and Geoffrey dashed into

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

the story in a fury of nervous haste. He read the first chapter at hot speed, then began skipping judiciously in order to present the whole at one sitting, reading the chief passages and telling scenes, everything in fact that was most strikingly characteristic. He did not dare look at Robert. He read on and on automatically, his voice rising and falling in monotonously correct inflections. What was Robert thinking? Was none of it coming back to him? Must he not recognize this—and this? Each sentence of especial force and beauty that he read unchallenged seemed to him a milestone safely passed. But other and more dangerous ones always loomed ahead. Would he never be done? He read faster and faster.

Suddenly Robert called to him softly. “I say, Geoffrey.”

A shiver ran up Geoffrey’s spine to the roots of his hair. The sheet fell from his hand. He looked up, forcing a smile to his lips.

“Yes? You recognize it?”

## THE LETTER D

Robert was leaning forward, a hand on either knee, his eyes wide and smiling.

"Was Miss Pruyn in your mind when you wrote that book? I don't know her, of course, but as far as looks go she might have sat for your Isobel."

An amazing feeling of relief swept over Geoffrey. He had to restrain himself from laughing aloud.

"She did," he answered briefly.

"It is a portrait by a master," Robert said with emphasis. "You are a literary Vandyke!"

Geoffrey made no reply. Catching up the dropped page, he read on more and more hurriedly to the end. He was not interrupted again, but as he finished and looked around he was startled by the expression of Robert's face. More than the shadow of his old enthusiasm flickered over it. The eyes that of late had been so dull and unresponsive were lighted to almost their wonted brilliance. He bent nearer, and laid his



## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

hand with something like affection on Geoffrey's knee.

"Do you really want my opinion? I have it ready. Your book is great!"

Geoffrey stooped over under pretence of laying the sheets together. He could not frame a syllable.

"I am no critic," Robert continued, "less than ever now, if I ever was one. But this is surely superb! Your characters could not be more alive if they were living it all out here before me. Nor if they were could the scenes appeal to me more powerfully. The meeting between Isobel and Mark in the crypt—that extraordinary race along the precipice—it is appalling, it is so vivid. I see it. I feel it. I am there. And that medieval setting is a picture in itself. And your style—man alive, how did you ever come by that style? From beginning to end your style is perfect!"

Geoffrey had moved to the other side of the room and thrown a window sash wider. He felt

## THE LETTER D

suffocating. Robert rose and crossed to where he stood.

“Shake hands on it, Geoffrey, won’t you? Of course I can’t appreciate it properly—a fellow can’t lose a part of his brain without invalidating the rest of it, I suppose. Still I realize well enough that your story is way out of the common, and by Jove, I am astonishingly proud of you!”

Every particle of colour had left Geoffrey’s face. He stood dumb and shaken before Robert like a criminal facing his judge, his cold hand limp and nerveless in the other’s grasp. He tried to speak, to deny the authorship of the book, to repudiate the praise; but he could form only an inarticulate murmur.

“It will take like wildfire,” Robert went on. “Why haven’t you sent it off? Don’t lose a day. Whom shall you give it to?”

After all, the publishing world might value it differently. Commercial estimates often do not tally with literary appraisements. The pub-

## THE ENIGMA OF A NAME

lishers might reject it. It would be time enough to set the matter straight with Robert if it were accepted. Silence now was saving him suspense and trouble. The thought brought the blood back to Geoffrey's veins. He found his voice.

"I shall offer it to Wright and Reed," he said, clearly and naturally, straightening his splendid figure to its fine height. "One might as well strike for the best first. They can't do more than turn it down."

"Turn it down!" Robert echoed. "They will snap at it. It is a book in a million. Your reputation is made. You will publish under your own name, of course—you are not thinking of a pen name?"

Geoffrey flinched, and caught his under lip between his teeth so sharply that it bled.

"No—no—not my name! Anonymously, perhaps, anonymously."

"Anonymity will not hide you. Wendover will know at once that it is yours. And Miss Pruyne

## THE LETTER D

can't object. . It is the greatest tribute that ever a woman had. What is the matter with your own name?"

Geoffrey suddenly looked up. His face cleared. He smiled again, quite like himself.

"Not my name—no," he said decidedly. "People shall puzzle it out. It shall be published under the letter 'D'."

## CHAPTER XIII

### *AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE*

. . . how worth  
That a man should strive and agonize  
And taste a veriest hell on earth  
For the hope of such a prize !

BROWNING.

IF it be true that the test of one's quota of amiability is the amount of it brought to the breakfast table, then the Doanes as a family were generously endowed with this quality, for it would have been difficult to find a more delightful atmosphere than that which prevailed at their first meal of the day. In summer the breakfast table stood on the deep wistaria-covered veranda opening from the dining-room, overlooking a garden such as rarely graces a

## THE LETTER D

city home, and the faces that gathered around it were a reflect of the sun and bloom. Meeting at a generously late hour, which permitted the gratification of any idiosyncrasies of drowsiness to the full, all as conspicuously immaculate as if the morning dews had that instant been brushed away, inquiries of each other as to how they had slept or how they felt, would have been as out of place as if addressed to a bed of flowers. The night had been successfully passed, since all were there to ring in the new day with laughter, and whatever its several visions might have been was never known, as the peculiarity about dreams is that nobody's dream is interesting except one's own, and by a happy instinct the Doanes seldom lighted on uninteresting topics. Perhaps, however, the main reason for the harmoniousness of their intercourse was that despite their geniality and spontaneity, they were a family of large reserves, having early acquired that appreciation of others' rights to their individual reticences which goes

## AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

far toward making community of life possible.

It was therefore a marked deviation from the unwritten code of their family customs, when Mollie, one morning, upon her way to her seat, caught up an envelope lying on the top of Geoffrey's mail at his plate, and held it up for the inspection of the rest.

"What is Geoff doing with publishing houses? Do look! This is from Wright & Reed. Can it be about his novel?"

No servant attended at this meal unless summoned by a bell, thus imposing no restraint upon the table, and a buzz of happy conjecture began, in which all took lively part except Ruth. Her thoughts immediately flew off to that other book about which nobody knew but herself. What was become of it? For a time it had seemed too unimportant to think about in the face of the terrible event that had followed that night of confidence. But was it lost? Why had it not been found among his papers? Had

## THE LETTER D

Robert destroyed it, after all, that evening, as he had everything else that he had written? Nobody had mentioned it, and she could not speak of it. It was Robert's secret—a secret that was to be between him and her only, and to keep his secret now was all that was left her to do for him, unless at some time fate should give her the chance to speak of it to him. Oh, how much had hung upon that book! How much Robert had hoped for it—expected from it! It was to have changed his future and hers. Now both were changed indeed, but how cruelly! Ruth shut her lips resolutely against a quiver of pain, and forced herself to return to her surroundings.

Geoffrey had come down from his room, fresh and handsome as an Adonis, and was taking his seat, sending a smile around the table like the flash of a sunbeam.

“Geoff! Geoff!” they all called out together, “Open it! Quick!”

Geoffrey glanced at his mail as he shook out his napkin. His face changed. But there was



## AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

not time yet for a decision. He promptly recovered himself.

"Oh, that? That isn't anything. That is to acknowledge the receipt of a manuscript."

"Your story, Geoff? Is it done? Have you sent them your story?"

"I expressed them a manuscript about a week ago." How patent the evasion sounded to himself!

A chorus of hurrahs went up, while Geoffrey pushed his letters out of the way and proceeded with his breakfast.

"So the story is finished," said the Judge complacently, looking affectionately at his son. "I began to think it was to be like a case in chancery. Well, the best of luck to it! I wish, though, that you had given us the hearing of it before it went."

"Not till after publication," Geoffrey returned, helping himself liberally to strawberries. "You know my vow."

"I know that the McKinley bill is nowhere

## THE LETTER D

compared to your protective tariff. But your policy doesn't extend to the title, does it? What have you called it?"

Geoffrey had himself well in hand by now.

"Oh, the publishers must pronounce upon that too, first. When the book is accepted you will know all fast enough."

"Do tell us a little something about it," urged his mother, smiling at him admiringly. "You have put none of us into it, I hope."

Geoffrey smiled lovingly back at her. "Not the ghost of any of you. You would make a book in three volumes all by yourself, mother dear."

"Whom have you put in?" asked Mollie. "Authors always write up living people, you know. That is why they are so unpopular with their dearest friends. But I hope you have not been so feeble minded as to stop for that. Wendover is stocked with characters. Ward says it is a second Cranford. I hope you have got the Jennings in."

## AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

"O my dear, aren't they a family and a half!" cried Ruth. "They are the sort of people, you know, Geoff, who always get angry because the train starts on time."

"And the Marstons," Edith put in. "They are so exasperatingly superior. The entire family makes it a point of principle never to use a fan."

"And they take such a deliciously narrow view of life," chimed in Ruth. "Their windows are all slits in the wall."

"How about eccentric Mrs. Van Allen?" suggested Mollie, flicking a bee away from the honey. "She is handsome enough at any rate to go into Geoff's book, with that brilliant rich colour as if she had been dipped in Burgundy."

"Handsome!" expostulated Nell. "Her mouth looks as if it had never been finished!"

"Well, there is Miss Morgan. Won't she do for classic lines?"

"She is too conceited."

"Conceited? Dear, no! She takes her beauty

## THE LETTER D

like a Christian. She stands in the middle of the room with uplifted eyes, and says: 'O Lord, I thank Thee that I am so much handsomer than every other woman present.' "

"She is a match to old Hartwell," laughed the Judge, pushing back his chair. "The pious old fellow looks as if he were saying to every man he met: 'I am damned glad that I am saved, and that you are not!' Have him in, Geoff, if you have to write a sequel! Have him in, do! with his sanctimonious X-ray eyes, that see nothing but the coin in every one's pocket!"

So the light talk ran on, till the sister sitting nearest Geoffrey could wait no longer. She picked up the publishers' letter between two dainty pink fingers and held it insinuatingly before his eyes, bending toward him coaxingly.

"Open it. There's a dear. I want to be sure that they haven't sent it back!"

True enough, that might be the purport of the letter. Geoffrey finished his coffee, and reluctantly taking the envelope, broke its seal and

## AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

drew out the sheet, Nell peering at it curiously from the back.

"It is long, anyway," she volunteered, for the benefit of the rest. "I can see the writing through. It quite covers the page. It is much too long to be a rejection. Goodness, Geoff! They haven't rejected it, have they?"

A look almost of dismay was on Geoffrey's face. He read the letter through again, then glancing up and meeting his father's inquiring gaze, stammered out: "It is impossible—so quickly. They accept it. They say—I never dreamed—"

A shout of joy cut him short, and before he knew it, his father had reached out a long authoritative arm and taken the letter from his hand, and was reading it aloud sonorously as if pronouncing judgment in court.

"*'Mr. Geoffrey Doane:*

*'DEAR SIR:—*

*' "The Requital" '—ah-ah, my boy!—'is without exception the best novel that it*

## THE LETTER D

has been our good fortune to have offered us for years. We write at once to assure you of its acceptance, and to state that we shall endeavour to rush it through in time for the fall trade. We shall have much to say to you later in detail of its excellencies, as of its striking dramatic qualities, which may render advisable the consideration of its early adaptation to the stage. We have a playwright in view, in case you do not care to undertake this yourself. Unless our judgment be wholly at fault, this story cannot fail to make a hit with the public that will be gratifying to author and publishers alike. We will proceed at once with the drawing up of the contract, which, if its terms prove satisfactory, we beg you to sign and return at your early convenience.

“Thanking you for the offer of the manuscript, we remain, with congratulations,

“Yours very truly,

“Wright & Reed.”

Well, well! What have all of you to say to that!”

The Judge laid down the letter with a complacency of tone and gesture that fully revealed his own sentiments. Geoffrey was standing up

## AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

beside him, vainly trying to collect himself. He was trembling like a girl, seeing all the happy upturned faces and hearing all the ecstatic voices as in a dream. In another moment the truth would have stumbled out, when, looking desperately beyond them all, he saw Constance standing in the doorway, tall and white and exquisite, holding a great bunch of red roses pressed against her bosom. Her eyes, rivetted on his face, had in them a pride and radiance such as he had never dared believe that he should see there while he lived. The vision struck him speechless. He stood looking back at her, surrendering his soul to her for ever.

His sisters, following the direction of his look, discovered their visitor. Instantly there was a delighted little rush of light muslins toward her from both sides of the table.

“Oh, did you hear? Do you know? Isn’t it glorious!”

Constance was smiling as no one had ever seen

## THE LETTER D

her smile before. She went up to Mrs. Doane and laid the roses in her lap.

“Aunt Alicia asked me to bring you these—they are from the tree you admired. Your man showed me out here. I did not mean to be indiscreet, but I could not help hearing the letter.” She suddenly stooped and kissed Mrs. Doane on the cheek. “Are you not very proud?” she asked, in a low deep voice that had a new note of kinship in it, and her beautiful face so shared the general delight that Mrs. Doane drew it down to kiss it again.

“My dear child, I am so glad that you came, so glad that you heard. We simply cannot contain ourselves for pride.”

With a single stride, Geoffrey was beside her, and held both her hands crushed in his.

“Constance!” he said appealingly.

He had never called her so openly before. She saw the swift look that flashed around. The colour flooded her face softly, her lids trembled and fell, but she did not flinch.



## AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

“I am very glad—Geoffrey,” she answered, her voice falling a little as she said his name. It was like acknowledging their betrothal.

The Judge looked from one to the other. Then he passed an arm around her, and drew her close as if she were already a daughter.

“My dear,” he said, his strong face aglow, “we have been waiting for this. There is nothing wanting now to make our happiness perfect.”

## CHAPTER XIV

### *CLANGING BELLS*

Chords that vibrate sweetest pleasure  
Thrill to deepest notes of woe.

BURNS.

EVERY soul knows the name of its individual pearl of great price to possess which it would sell all its wealth besides. And few, in the first intoxication of possession, confess that they may have purchased their treasure at a loss. The gain is always tangible, while it is only in the strict debit and credit account which Nature keeps with every one of us that our loss is clearly shown. We have merely to close the ledger if we would shut it from our view. And as to the Nessus' robe, remorse, if we refuse to wear the garment, how shall it work us harm?

## CLANGING BELLS

So Geoffrey forced his thoughts aside from all that could poison his bliss, and the weeks flew by on wings. Everything should certainly be righted—before the book came out. It was impossible that this deception—this misunderstanding—should go on indefinitely. After all he had said nothing untrue, nothing that he would be obliged to retract. He would merely have to point out that the letter D stood for Dunbar and not for Doane.

He had a moment's qualm over the contract. But how could Robert rightly sign it? Was the completely forgotten book really Robert's now? Robert had virtually died. Geoffrey was his literary executor. He acted for Robert, signing the contract as Robert's unbonded representative, sworn in his heart to promote his friend's best interests. The whole matter should be duly straightened out, of course. Meanwhile—just till the book came out—why should he not be happy? Alas! Great is the skill of the human heart in compounding moral

## THE LETTER D

anodynes, and while conscience sleeps, at least one is out of suffering, even though when it awakes one may pay for the respite of that slumber with more than double pain.

Geoffrey, therefore, leaving everything, even to the reading of the proofs, in the publishers' hands, allowed himself to be insanely happy. And by some perverse law this ill-won joy brought out all that was best and most charming in him, his nature sweetening in it as a fruit mellows in the southern sun. Never had he been so lovable, so considerate, so unselfish, so chivalric, so eager to promote others' pleasure. Constance felt herself drawn closer to him every day. The atmosphere of whole-hearted joyousness with which he and his family surrounded her was as wine to her soul, and she too unfolded and blossomed in it, putting off her reserve as a flower pushes aside its sheath, and giving herself out more and more in return till the Doanes declared they were every one of them to the full as much in love with her as was Geoffrey.

## CLANGING BELLS

Those were halcyon days at the Manor and at Red Roofs. Never was any betrothal the subject of more rejoicing. Not for years had little Miss Alicia felt so close to real things, so at one with life's springtime and its lovely mysteries. It inspired her to take down her heart from some forgotten shelf, and shake it out from its life-long wrappings into faint breathings of old-time flavours of romance. She could talk of nothing but the engagement.

"Your Aunt Sara always foresaw it," she said proudly, elated at this incontrovertible demonstration of her sister's sagacity. "She predicted it even before you came. Dear, it may seem soon to be speaking about the wedding, but in addition to what we propose to give you there are some of our dear mother's jewels that we would like you to have, now while you are young, for of course they will all be yours in the end. It was Sara's suggestion when we were looking them over the other day. Which was it you thought that she should have, Sara,

## THE LETTER D

the necklace and pendant, or the big star?"

Constance was standing by, tall and slim and queenly, her new happiness sitting on her like a crown. What need had she of jewels, she to whom fate had already given earth's best? She threw back her head with a low satisfied laugh. Miss Sara, sitting large and somnolent by the summer window, as she had sat, large and somnolent, by the winter fire, glanced uncertainly from the round pearl-white throat to the mass of sparkling hair.

"Either," she said succinctly.

Miss Alicia clapped her hands.

"There! Sara has settled it, and in the best way, as she always does. You are to have both. Sara always knows."

And Constance looking affectionately at the old-fashioned sweet face, with its fluttering lids and delicate lady-apple bloom, felt semi-consciously, as did every one who knew Miss Alicia,

## CLANGING BELLS

that a scent of lavender was as good in the character as in the clothes.

But other interests claimed their share in filling the sunny summer hours. Mollie's wedding day was fixed for the twentieth of September, and the preparations were early in hand for a large and brilliant reception. When Red Roofs opened its doors to a new member, the world should see that it was not with tears and reluctance, but generously and gladly, as befitted a big-hearted home.

Already it was September. And now the cards were out, and the pretty bride-elect and her sisters were dividing their time between opening white beribboned packages in the Racket Room under Mrs. Doane's charmed gaze, and rushing upstairs to try on exquisite wedding gowns. Then, out of the clear sky, fell a bomb.

Constance was in the Manor library, re-arranging some late grown sweet-peas in a slender silver vase, when she heard Geoffrey's voice outside, and he came hurrying in, watch in hand.

## THE LETTER D

“Dearest, I have just a minute and a half. I am on my way to Washington. Ward is ill.”

The sweet-peas fell from her fingers.

“Ward ill!”

“Not seriously, we hope. Still there are symptoms of pneumonia. Mollie is in a panic. I must go at once, if only to comfort her.”

“Of course! Of course! The poor child! There is no knowing, I suppose, when you will be back?”

“In time for the twentieth, if all goes well. This is only the tenth. That gives time enough for a strong young fellow to pull up. Constance—” he came close to her—“will you love me better than ever while I am gone to make up to me for leaving you?”

Her grave deep eyes shone.

“Not even missing you can teach me to love you better than I do. O Geoffrey! if it were you who were ill! I dare not think of how I love you! You are everything to me.”

Her rare admissions seemed wrung out of her



## CLANGING BELLS

inmost soul. Geoffrey folded his arms about her.

"Tell me truly, Constance, is it I—I whom you love, and not an ideal of me that I shall never be? Do you love me for what I really am? Will you love me so for ever?"

"My love for you is the breath of my life," she said. "I could not unlearn it."

"But is it I whom you love—I?"

"You," she answered, and at her smile his head swam. He bent closer.

"Constance," he whispered, "must I wait? Remember that I am going away from you."

The beautiful light in her eyes deepened and softened at the appeal in his. She moved her face ever so slightly upward, and their lips met. In another instant he had gone.

Geoffrey found Ward more ill than had been admitted. But the young man began to improve immediately, wholly owing, he affirmed, to Geoffrey's cheery influence, and very soon, to every one's infinite relief, it was telegraphed to Red

## THE LETTER D

Roofs that the wedding need not be postponed.

Still, despite Ward's steady convalescence, it was pronounced safest to defer the journey till the last possible moment, and the train which took them north was not due at Wendover before the very morning of the twentieth. This, however, left them an ample margin of time, even should their train be considerably retarded. They brought with them Lieutenant Carr, Ward's best man, from Washington, and the three fellows would have had a merry enough time by the way but that they had not calculated for a wreck on the road and a consequent delay of five hours. This brought them to the fever point of anxiety. There would now be barely time to save the situation. But from the last station save one, Geoffrey sent a reassuring telegram to the family: "All right dress on train meet you at church on time," and reaching Wendover twenty minutes before the hour fixed for the ceremony, he bundled the two officers into a carriage, despatching them

## CLANGING BELLS

to Red Roofs, and had himself driven furiously to All Saints, where, as usher, he had been due some time before.

He found, to his chagrin, that the church was already filled, but snatching his favour from one of the other ushers, he thrust it into his button-hole, and anxious to perform what of his duties were left to him, offered his arm to Mrs. Quixley as she came hurrying in at the central door. She seized it with alacrity. Her hideous mouth became an enormous smile.

"I do not mind being late if I am to have the great man in person for escort! Really, Mr. Doane, the bride will have to look to her honours. I wish I might have been the first to congratulate you. I suppose by now you are surfeited with compliments, as the entire town is reading your book."

Geoffrey's blood turned to ice. "My book!" he gasped.

"Don't look so astonished. One would think you did not know that it was out."

## THE LETTER D

“You mean—what book do you mean?”

“‘The Requitall,’ of course. It is stupendous! It is a miracle!—No, not this seat. Farther up, please. Next to the ribbon.—None of us expected anything in the least like this. How could we? One does not chance upon such a book twice in a lifetime. Why didn’t you put your full name to it? Not that that matters though.—Oh, these ladies will not mind moving up, I am sure.” She remorselessly crushed her way into a crowded pew. “Thank you. Don’t rush off, Mr. Doane. Mrs. Hill—” She leaned over the seat in front of her. “Here is Mr. Doane.”

The lady addressed instantly turned, eager and beaming.

“O Mr. Doane! That glorious book! I knew it for yours at once. Really, it was a shame that Prescott left no one a chance to guess.”

“Prescott?” Geoffrey queried feebly, past knowing what he said.

“I told him. I told all the booksellers that it was yours,” said Mrs. Quixley with satisfaction.

## CLANGING BELLS

“I met your father the day your book came, and after hearing about it, it occurred to me to go the rounds of the bookstores. It helped bring it to immediate notice. I like to befriend genius. Oh, don’t go, Mr. Doane! Mr. Whiting is dislocating his neck to speak to you.”

Before Geoffrey could release himself from Mr. Whiting, every one within remotest speaking distance had deluged him with congratulations, and when he finally wrenched himself away and turned to go down the aisle, he became aware that every eye was upon him, and that every end-seat occupant of every pew was waiting to grasp his hand. Good heavens, how should he ever get to the door! He turned sick. Would he be able to keep out of his face the sudden agony of shame that had him in its grip? He had laid this trap for himself. Now it had sprung upon him and had him fast. The book had been promised for the twenty-fifth. Before that date he would certainly have made everything clear to Constance and to his family. Who could have im-

## THE LETTER D

agined that it would be out before the time? That one chance had undone him.

What he endured during the space of time that it took him to walk down the aisle should have expiated the misdeeds of a lifetime. He never forgot it. The faces as he went on became a meaningless blur of smiles, the voices a meaningless murmur of praise. He no longer recognized even his best friends. He saw merely, with a rush of gratitude through all his torture, that one last drop was wanting to his cup of misery—Robert was not there. He felt himself bowing, shaking hands, smiling, speaking even, as if he were an automaton propelled by some inside machinery of habit that had the upper hand of him, and that prevented him from gnashing his teeth and crying out to them all: "It is a lie. I stole it. The book is Robert Dunbar's." And as he thought the words he grew faint for terror lest in his agony he should have pronounced them aloud.

To fling himself out into the vestibule as he

## CLANGING BELLS

reached the foot of the church, was to escape from Purgatory. But he had scarcely drawn breath before his mother appeared with Edith, and the intolerableness was all to undergo again. He grew numb. One can suffer only up to a certain point. Beyond that all is of a piece. He gave his arm to Mrs. Doane in callous despair.

"My dearest boy!" she exclaimed in a rapturous undertone, squeezing his arm tight. "A thousand welcomes! O Geoff, your book! Of course you had our Round-Robin letter?"

"I got no letter about it. I wish to God I had!" Geoffrey groaned. A letter, too, then had miscarried? Second fatal mischance!

"Strange!" Mrs. Doane murmured. "We all wrote in it—even Constance. The books—a dozen—came last Friday. O my dear, to think that you never told us what a wonder it was!"

"Hush! Hush! Don't speak of it for Heaven's sake!"

## THE LETTER D

Mrs. Doane lowered her exultant voice still more.

“I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help it. Nobody is noticing me. They are all looking at you. O Geoff, it is magnificent! Your father is wild about it. He says—”

So it went on all the way up the aisle, till he had her safely in the front pew. Then there was Edith’s eloquent face as she followed. Geoffrey’s misery seemed at its height. He barely waited to close the pew-door on his sister’s train, and escaped into a side aisle in such haste that he forgot his mother’s fan and had to turn back with it.

When he reached the vestibule the second time, the bridal party was formed into line behind the closed doors, and the ushers were called to take their places. Geoffrey had time for but a glance back to where Constance stood among the bridesmaids. She was watching for him, and as their eyes met a soft pink glow suffused her, and the first self-conscious look that he had



## CLANGING BELLS

ever seen on her face passed lightly over it, making her for the moment look as shy and timid as a young girl.

Geoffrey set his teeth hard, inwardly raging. The book again! Always the book! The organist struck into the wedding march. Geoffrey turned round quickly, thankful that he could do no more than give a hasty nod to his father, who was trying his utmost to get a glimpse of his son over the heads of the group. The church doors were thrown wide. Ward and Lieutenant Carr, gorgeously uniformed, stood at the head of the chancel steps, and behind the rails, book in hand, waited Dr. Dunbar and Bishop Reynolds, an old rector of All Saints, who had baptized Mollie twenty happy years before. The word was given, and the joyous procession took its slow way up the aisle, every step, to Geoffrey, one of unimagined humiliation. The sight of Dr. Dunbar's saintly face smote him to the quick. Would he never again get out of range of those calm, clear, penetrat-

## THE LETTER D

ing eyes? His blood was beating in his head. He heard no word of the service. He saw nothing of it. The usher next him had to touch him on the arm when it was time to turn and head the procession back. As he faced about he went deadly sick again. Every eye in the crowded building seemed fixed full on him. He had to force himself to time his pace by his companion's, lest he should make a rush for the door. At least, though, no one could speak to him now; it was not required of him to see any one. He straightened his shoulders and threw up his head, braving them all. But he could not lift his eyes, even to fix them upon a safe point above the line of faces, and so walked down the interminable aisle once more, his gaze set stonily on the small squares duskily patterned in the red carpet that stretched out miles beneath his feet.

At the house it was worse still. There he could escape nothing. Even Mollie, as he kissed her, through all her pretty bridal agitation, thought first of the book. His father nearly

## CLANGING BELLS

wrung his hand off. And the Bishop caught him by the arm, calling out genially in his carrying episcopal voice that seemed to have no transept notes: "How is this, young man? I hear marvellous things of your book. They say you had an ovation at the church."

By careful manœuvring, Geoffrey succeeded in evading Dr. Dunbar. The bridesmaids, though, had each to be faced. Constance murmured only: "Bye and bye, Geoffrey. I cannot talk of it here," and gave him again that shy, half frightened glance, while the beautiful pink flush swept like a breath of bloom across her face. But each of the others, except Ruth, had ready her ecstatic encomium that would not be evaded or deferred. Ruth said nothing. She only nodded to him and then shook her veil around her as if hiding in it out of his reach. Geoffrey was grateful to her at the time, though afterward he recalled her silence and wondered at it, as at the troubled look she threw toward him whenever he came near. Robert was not

## THE LETTER D

present. Geoffrey was still spared that final torture. It had always been difficult to lure Robert into society, and since his illness he had refused to attend any festivities whatever. But it was a brilliant day, a brilliant occasion, and the Doanes had an unlimited acquaintance, so that it seemed to Geoffrey as if, with Robert's sole exception, his entire world were present. He rushed headlong into his duties, keeping himself so incessantly busy as to give no one the chance of more than a word with him, while he declined absolutely to speak about the book. But even this was commented on to his advantage. "Such modesty! Genuine, too!" he overheard several times murmured behind his back, and he could have cursed himself to their faces.

Certainly this extreme of modesty, however becoming, is rarely expected of an author, but it ingratiated Geoffrey the more in general favour, and his parents looked after him very lovingly and approvingly, as at the close of the

## CLANGING BELLS

reception, the bride and groom having left, he bore Constance off for a talk in the conservatory. She might have been a bride herself in her pure white gown and veil, with no colour anywhere about her except in the deep blue of her eyes, and that faint rose tint that pulsed up every now and then under her cheeks. She seated herself beneath a tall palm at the farther end of the deserted place and looked eagerly but searchingly up at him.

“I do not quite understand you to-day. You are somehow different from yourself. Is it because you are so high above us, now?”

It was Geoffrey's opportunity. He had brought her there with a half-formed intention of confession. But she left him no time to begin it, and he could only listen and let the music of her low rich voice work its usual spell upon him.

“Did you think I cared less than the others, dear, because I could not speak of your book before them? Or did you know that I cared

## THE LETTER D

more—infinately more—than they all together? At first—just at first—do not blame me too much!—I felt, about Isobel—I could hardly bring myself to write you those few lines. I could not help seeing that you meant Isobel for an idealized portrait of me, and I felt ashamed and almost hurt, as if you had given me to the public, making our love public, too, in a way. But thinking it over, I saw that that was a narrow, egotistic, sentimental feeling. After all, few would associate pale me with your brilliantly coloured Isobel in her cloth-of-gold gowns. And anyway, it was only the poor outside of me at most that you put into your book. The chief me—the real me—you kept back. That me is yours alone, and will be unknown for ever to any one but you. You could not give that me to the world if you tried. So then I read the book again, and—O Geoffrey!” She threw out her hands in the powerlessness of speech to express her, and her eyes were as sapphires against the sun.

## CLANGING BELLS

“Then—” Geoffrey’s voice was subdued and husky, “You are satisfied? This is what you desired?”

“It is more than anything I could have dreamed of,” she said with exultation. “You have made me the happiest—the proudest—woman on earth. I asked for bread, and you have given me a star!”

Geoffrey half closed his eyes, unable to endure the full sight of her in her perfect joy and trust. Why undeceive her now? The matter could not be straightened out. It had been taken wholly out of his hands. Why not leave her a little longer to her blind felicity? Of course he must tell her some day—before they were married; he could not make her his wife with this between them. But she should first taste the full sweetness of her unclouded belief and pride in him. Was not that worth as much to her as her love was worth to him? And had not his love a right to this brief breathing space?

## THE LETTER D

He stood silently before her, his eyes full of his inward conflict, and she looked at him a little timidly.

“There is still something about you that I do not understand. What is it? Are you less happy than I am? Is there anything lacking to you?” She got up and came close to him, her eyes smiling divinely into his. “I want you to be as utterly and senselessly happy as I am. No. I am not senselessly happy. I am happy with every separate sense that I have, but I am happy besides with all my heart and soul and mind. Geoffrey—” she flushed more softly still — “I promised to give it to you when you gave me your book. Kiss me—love.”

The low enchanting murmur was like balm poured on his bruised soul. She was all his at last. At last she was wholly won. And as he kissed her he knew that to win her so he would have gone through this living hell twice over.



## CHAPTER XV

### *LAUREL AND RUE*

Ah, side by side with heart's ease in this world  
The fatal night-shade grows and bitter rue !

LOWELL.

"THE Requital" met at once with a success amazing even to those who had predicted it. By some lucky chance or some miracle of good management, it immediately caught attention, and as instantly won its way to that large public heart so lavishly generous to its favourites. From one end of the country to the other it was spoken of only in extravagant admiration. Edition followed edition with unexampled rapidity. Its dramatization was almost simultaneous with its publication, and an early staging of the play, made possible by the publishers' close connections with a leading theatrical

## THE LETTER D

manager, was promised at a date forestalling any cooling down of the first fever heat of enthusiasm. Everything combined to rush the book along on a tide of unparalleled prosperity. Never was any work launched more triumphantly upon an assured career.

Geoffrey, confounded and remorse-stricken, kept as much in the background as possible. He acquiesced in all the proposed publishing arrangements, suggesting nothing, and assuming no responsibilities. There was but one point upon which Wright & Reed found their delightful author unexpectedly obdurate. No protestations moved him to substitute his name for that ridiculously inadequate letter D on his title page. That apart, he requested nothing except to be left in peace, washing his hands of the drama, and refusing to read the press notices. His friends did not know what to make of him. He would listen to nothing about his book, either in praise or discussion.

“The thing is there for every one to read, but

## LAUREL AND RUE

I am done with it," he would say, his brows contracting in a way that was fast becoming habitual, and that gave an unmistakable emphasis to his words. "Why should I be compelled to hear the braying of my fellow donkeys over it?"

Courteous, sunny-hearted Geoffrey seemed undergoing a metamorphosis. He who had always been the centre of everything that went on, now loathed his lawful prominence. At Red Roofs, if the novel were mentioned, he would snatch up his violin and play a crazy Strauss waltz, or drum Beethoven's Funeral March on the piano, till his astonished family learned that contrary to the literary habit his book was a tabooed subject in his presence. But as Ruth declared, the Doanes between them all had a great deal of human nature, and family pride being a large ingredient in it, it was not surprising that frequent allusions to "The Requital" were a moral necessity, even if Geoffrey chanced to be by. Ruth alone never offended in this way. Geoffrey had ceased to wonder at her

## THE LETTER D

silence. It was a relief to know that with her, at least, he was always safe from this new and appalling kind of hurt. She had, too, a subtle way of shielding him from harassing laudation without seeming to do so that he found an unspeakable comfort. But he often caught her eyes fixed intently upon him, their sparkle lost in puzzled pain, and whenever he encountered them, he lowered his.

“Don’t study me so!” he sometimes burst out, screening his impatience behind an affectation of playfulness. “Are you counting the grey cells in my brain?” And he would go behind her and take her small head between his hands as if to caress it, and stand there a moment or two holding her so that she could not see his face.

That something that Constance did not quite understand in Geoffrey was not exorcised even by the spell which her love cast around him. It was settled that their marriage was to take place during the winter; yet, ardent lover though he

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was, Geoffrey put off demanding that the day should be more definitely set. His restlessness and uneasiness increased. It was only when he was with Constance that his charming light-hearted moods ever came fully back to him. Often, too, these were unaccountably exaggerated, his joyousness amounting almost to abandonment, while at the same time there was an undercurrent in his laughter that was far from being mirth.

Constance rarely saw the fits of depression that alternated with these too gay moods, her presence serving to rouse him from them. But his family could not fail to note the alteration in their idol, and before long propounded it to each other as a Doane problem not to be submitted to outsiders, why the sum total of happiness plus fame should equal misery?

Between Geoffrey and Robert the new makeshift friendship continued stationary, which of itself proved its superficiality, as no heart intimacies ever remain unchanged, but either wax

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or wane with time. Robert, however, was intimate with no one now. Had he been among actual strangers it would have been easier to begin life over and to form new ties. But among these seeming strangers who were in reality all old friends, he felt singularly hampered. How could he go on, not knowing where he had left off? It was like stepping out into the dark to find a road that because of the darkness he had missed. It seemed wiser to wrap himself in the reserve which is Nature's coat of mail for defenceless souls. Ruth he seldom saw. When by chance he passed her in the street, he looked at her closely, remembering that first strange look of hers. But she only bowed and went by, a little quickly because of the stab at the heart that came at sight of him, and he never saw that look again.

Ruth, too, had changed of late. But the only person to notice it was Miss McIntyre, whose keen old eyes often saw farther than younger ones, as old eyes should, with the experience of

## LAUREL AND RUE

all their years to serve them as beacon lights.

“What on earth has come over you, Ruth?” she asked, a little plaintively, for no one likes changes that affect oneself. “You are not half as good company as you used to be, and you have nothing to say about anybody. It is not gossip, you know, to say mean things about one’s intimates. It is gossip only to say them about people one doesn’t know. But nobody is good company any more, and as for myself I am worse than any. I get so bored with myself that I am driven to sending for Eli Thwaite, for the mere gratification of knowing that somebody is duller than I am. He never disappoints me. He is always as stolid and unemotional as a freight car.”

“I never find you dull, Miss McIntyre.”

“That is because you are not paying any attention to me these days. You are getting too wrapped up in your thoughts, Ruth. And you are forgetful as well as neglectful. You never

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brought me the rest of that money for my poor man."

"Did I promise to bring it?" Ruth asked calmly. "Then I have forgotten."

"Oh, never mind. I got the rest out of Eli. Horrid name—Eli. Strange that the two things which are the first and last we connect intimately with any man are the only two for which he is not in the least responsible—his name, and the sentiment on his tombstone. Well, Eli gave me my money, and so my carpenter got his work. I never give money to poor people. It is humiliating to any self-respecting person to be given money. I always give work instead. So I had that window cut through from my pantry that I have been wanting for years, and the poor fellow was most grateful for the work. A very neat job he made of it, and the thirty-five dollars quite set him on his feet, too. So child, you see the good that you helped do."

Ruth's expressive mouth curled a little sus-



## LAUREL AND RUE

piciously. One likes to be of use to one's friends, but not to be the hammer with which they drive in their nails.

The old lady was by no means too dull to note the significance of Ruth's silence. She cheerfully introduced a new topic.

"How is Geoffrey? I don't see him much, either. Everybody neglects me. Geoffrey is unlike himself, too. He is never in the same mood two minutes at a time. He has become a variorum edition of himself. What troubles him? Hasn't he all the fame he can shoulder, and a wife in prospect that everybody professes to be head over heels in love with? He is not getting jealous, is he?"

Ruth opened her clear brown eyes wide.

"Jealous? of whom should Geoff be jealous?"

"All the better for him, my dear, if he is not. To allow oneself to be jealous, is deliberately to sit down in a wasp's nest. But something is wrong with him. He has not been the same

## THE LETTER D

since that book of his came out. Strange about that book, too."

Ruth looked up sharply. "I don't know what you mean."

"I don't know myself. That is why I say it is strange," returned Miss McIntyre composedly. "The book is not like Geoffrey, that is all. There is nothing medieval about Geoffrey. And the book is—well, you know what the book is. It is the work of an exceptionally brilliant mind, and of an essentially literary mind—a mind that can't breathe outside its inkpot. Now I don't want to say anything against Geoffrey's mind. It is good enough for Geoffrey, and a great deal too good, considering how much else he has. One doesn't want all the gifts in creation sampled in one man. But as to his mind—I should have said that Geoffrey's mind could not have produced such a book as 'The Requital.' The higher the pole the deeper its foundation. I don't see Geoffrey's foundation."

## LAUREL AND RUE

Ruth gave Miss McIntyre a startled glance. Then her loyalty ran to the front, bristling with bayonet points.

"The production of the book should be evidence enough that Geoffrey's mind is equal to it. What room can there possibly be for conjecture about it?"

"Ah well, of course not," agreed Miss McIntyre crossly, in the tone that denies conviction while admitting it. "Everybody else seems to think it the most natural thing in the world that being such a charming fellow and with such a facile go-as-you-please pen, Geoffrey should suddenly sit down and reel off a finished production like that without any literary preparation whatever. So why should I be struck by it? I hope he may write another as good. Nothing is ever lost by hoping for it. I go that far with the Christian Scientists at least. Still, tell him from me not to write another book—unless he wants to risk his laurels."

## THE LETTER D

"Geoff is not thinking of writing another."

"So much the better. A wise man doesn't gamble with his reputation, once he has one. My dear, you are pale."

"The day is raw. I am chilly," Ruth said hastily, rising. "I need a walk to stir my blood."

"Quite right. Go. I am sure I don't want to see you again till you are more amusing." She gave Ruth a smile with the words, the unexpectedly sweet smile upon which Miss McIntyre's friends pinned their faith. "I dare say a long walk will do you good. So won't you just leave this list at the druggist's for me?" She produced a paper from somewhere in a twinkling. "Go to Harters'. They are the cheapest. And drop in at Swayne's as you go—it is only a few blocks out of the way—and tell them I want my sable cloak. I have nobody to send but Henrietta, and once I let her out of the house she never comes back. I believe she gets talking to the lamp-posts. Henrietta has

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to talk or die. I have no use for women who can't keep their tongues from clacking. I suppose you think I clack, but I don't. I never say anything but what is worth listening to. Will you take this list?"

Ruth could not be a Doane and be unamiable. But her amiability was not of the soft-cushion kind. She had no desire to be an easy chair and to be sat in all her life. So remarking that her way led in a different direction, and offering to send the old lady a messenger boy if she pleased, which she did not, Ruth presently got away.

Anxious to be alone, she went to a little outlying park, very deserted and dismal, and there gave free rein to her thoughts. So Miss McIntyre, too, had doubts about the book, and considered it unaccountable that Geoffrey should have written it? Yet Miss McIntyre knew nothing about that other book. Nobody but herself knew anything about that other book, unless Geoffrey— She pressed her hands against her eyes. No! no! Not that! Of course it was a

## THE LETTER D

mere coincidence that Robert and Geoffrey should both have taken Constance for their heroine. As to that insufficient letter D, it stood equally well for Doane. And that the story should read so like what Robert might have written—that was no proof. Geoffrey, too, was clever enough to have written it—since he had written it. And yet—what was become of Robert's book? A fluttering sob rose to her throat, but she choked it resolutely back. Geoffrey's aversion to talking about his book—his altered manner—his strange moods—what possible connection could they have with Robert's manuscript? Nothing of course. It was her own mood that was at fault. We are all too apt to view the moods of others through the medium of our own. What was she daring to suspect—and of her adored Geoffrey!

Again the sob rose in her throat, and this time it escaped her. She had wandered into a lonely side-path, and was sitting miserably on an iron bench, trying to think out her wretched puzzle,

## LAUREL AND RUE

caring little for the cold and dreariness of the late November day. But the sound of her sob startled her. She looked up quickly to see if there were any one near to overhear. And there, not half a dozen steps away, stood Robert Dunbar, looking at her in perplexity, not knowing if he ought to pass on, or stay and proffer help. Ruth sprang to her feet, and then, too shaken to stand, fell back on the bench, her tears coursing helplessly down her face.

Robert came forward a step or two timidly.

"Is there anything that I can do?"

Ruth shook her head, and unable either to check her tears or to conceal them, sank down against the railing of the bench and shut her eyes, while the tears streamed faster. Robert drew near.

"Perhaps you would rather I went away, but I can't leave you like this. If you could tell me— You see I am so ignorant. There may be things—about people, I mean—that I ought to understand without telling—that everybody

## THE LETTER D

understands, but that I have forgotten. It makes me awkward and useless. I am afraid of saying the wrong thing, of hurting people, perhaps. But if it is any trouble that I could help you in, I should be glad."

He sat down beside her, speaking very gently, and Ruth's forlornness and pain surged over her so that she could not endure it. Reaching out a trembling little hand to him like a child in distress, she turned her face around against the iron rail out of his sight, and sobbed pitifully.

Robert took her hand in uncomprehending sympathy and held it silently, not knowing what else to do, wondering hazily if he had ever held any woman's hand so before. But presently Ruth recovered herself, and her strength coming back she sat up, drawing her hand away, and dried her poor little wet face. Then she sat very still, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap, not trusting herself to look at him.

"I cannot tell you what is troubling me," she said, looking straight out before her at the leaf-



## LAUREL AND RUE

less trees, bare and dark under the brooding sky like denuded hopes. "I cannot tell it to anybody. Please forget that you have seen me like this. It makes me ashamed that I should have given way so. But—since we have met—there is something that I would like to ask you. We knew each other—quite well—once. We were—" she hesitated— "we were friends once." Her hands were numb from the pressure of the one upon the other. "And you told me then—as a secret—"

She had been speaking very slowly. Now she paused altogether and turned toward him, still not looking up, uncertain how to go on, fearing to implicate Geoffrey. But Robert said nothing, and with an effort she raised her troubled eyes to his face. He was looking at her fixedly, his dark eyes full of intelligent interest, but without a glimmer of recollection in their lustrous depths. Ruth's lids fell again instantly. In spite of her, her lips quivered.

## THE LETTER D

“What did I tell you?” Robert asked, to encourage her. “If it was my secret, could you not tell it me again? Or did it concern some one else? Is it something that you should not repeat now?”

“No, oh no,” she hurried to answer. “It concerned only you. It was that—that you were a writer, though you destroyed what you wrote.” She dared not speak directly of the finished book. “And I wondered whether perhaps you had kept something—the last thing, perhaps—whether you had it now—something—anything—like—”

She broke off. How could he help hearing her heart beat!

He finished her sentence for her with a gentle laugh.

“Anything like your brother’s novel, for instance? That would be something indeed—only to know that one had once been capable of such a masterpiece! It is most good of you to be so interested. If I made a secret of it, it

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must be because what I wrote was so bad that I was ashamed of it. But certainly I kept nothing, for I have nothing now."

"You are sure? You are quite sure?" Her voice did not betray her, but her heart stopped beating.

Robert answered her with perfect naturalness.

"Oh, I am positive as to that. Geoffrey and I went together through my papers, and there was nothing of the sort anywhere—not so much as a line of callow verse."

He was surprised at the transformation in her. The colour rushed into her cheeks, her lips parted in the sweetest smile that he had ever seen, and her charming eyes, fearlessly lifted, looked frankly and gladly into his. He thought that he had never seen a more interesting face.

"May I ask you something in my turn?" he said, hesitating now himself. "I should so like to know what it was that you expected me to say when we met that day at Miss McIntyre's. I

## THE LETTER D

thought there was something. It has troubled me. I could not guess."

Ruth turned away as if she had received a galvanic shock. She clasped and unclasped her hands, unable to speak. Robert leaned a little toward her.

"Was it perhaps because we had been friends, as you say, that you felt I ought to recognize you?"

"Yes." It was almost a whisper.

Robert leaned nearer, something in the way he had been used to do, and a tremor ran through her.

"I have no friends now," he said, not sadly, but with that resignation which is drearier than sadness. "I am not fitted to be a friend. Something is gone from me. Back of a certain point I neither hear nor see. All is as absolute a blank as if there were nothing there. I spend my whole strength trying to pierce that nothingness and get myself back out of it. It is only half living to have no past. The incom-

## LAUREL AND RUE

pleteness hurts. The part of me that is left is continually crying out for the part of me that is gone. I want myself back, and I cannot find myself. I do not know myself as I am. It is that that makes me shrink from people. They are not as I am. They could not understand."

"I understand," Ruth said. "It is cruel!" She turned her face to his as she spoke. Her eyes were swimming.

"Forgive me!" Robert exclaimed penitently. "I have spoken so to no one else. It is unpardonable of me. But you do understand. That must be my excuse."

"Speak to me always so!" Ruth said, her look making the words a petition. "I shall always understand." And though the tears brimmed over, she did not turn her face away.

Robert gently took her hand in his again.

"Then may I recognize a friend in you now, Miss Ruth, though I did not before?"

"Yes," Ruth answered, with a tremulous smile. Then she gave his hand a friendly little

## THE LETTER D

squeeze as she drew hers away and sprang up.

“Do you know how bitterly cold it is, Mr. Dunbar? There is snow in the air,” she said, quite in her old bright way, drawing her grey furs closer about her throat and giving a wise bird-like glance at the sky. “I came out for a brisk walk.” She lingered a moment. “Good-bye.”

“But I came out for a walk, too,” Robert returned, settling his hat with the peculiar jerk of his head that she so well remembered. “Might I—would you mind if I went with you?”

## CHAPTER XVI

### *THE CHECK*

Yesterday this Day's Madness did prepare,  
To-morrow's Silence, Triumph or Despair.

OMAR.

RUTH returned to Red Roofs more like herself than she had been for a long time, her brown eyes shining, her merry laugh ringing out sweet and clear. So swiftly is a fainting hope revived, and so good is it to be freed from a haunting suspicion at one's heels!

She was eager to see Geoffrey and covertly make up to him for the monstrous injustice of her thought. In the reaction from it, she wondered how it had been possible to misjudge him.

## THE LETTER D

His depression, his pre-occupation, and that occasional irritability which would scarcely have been remarked in anyone else, were due doubtless to those mysterious professional worries about which women, as a rule, hear so much and learn so surprisingly little. For of late, turning an absolutely deaf ear to any suggestion that he should begin another book, Geoffrey had shown a remarkable diligence in his law work, putting into it all the energy and industry that he had so unexpectedly developed in his writing, until his father proudly declared that his son would make as famous a name in law as in literature.

No one suspected how much of Geoffrey's increased ardour arose from an imperative need to rid himself of a torturing memory which in every unguarded moment laid its octopus grasp upon him. There was comfort, too, in knowing that Robert would reap largely from the beneficial results of his partner's zeal. It was a species of atonement wherewith Geoffrey salved



## THE CHECK

his conscience, after the manner of most wrongdoers, as if a right in one direction, counterbalancing a wrong in another direction, made that wrong right.

Robert came regularly to the office, and tried conscientiously to do his part. But he was less than ever fitted for legal work. He was restless and abstracted, and time and again would jump up and seize his hat with the invariable apology: "I am sick trying to remember. I simply must walk it off."

It was while he was on an aimless tramp of the sort, during which he met Ruth in the park, that the mid-day mail brought Geoffrey a letter from Wright & Reed. Geoffrey opened it with the invincible repugnance with which he received every communication from that firm. It contained a folded bit of pink paper, and a graceful little note, which stated that the publishers of "The Requital" took pleasure in forwarding the enclosed check to Mr. Geoffrey Doane in advance of the terms of their contract, as a fore-

## THE LETTER D

taste of his proceeds on the amazing sales of his admirable book, and as a token of their own gratification and great good will.

Geoffrey read the note with consternation. Then he unfolded the enclosure. It was a check for two thousand dollars. He stared at it, stupefied. The monetary value of the book had been so wholly outside his mind in connection with it that he had not given a moment's thought to possible financial returns. He sat with the check open in his hands. Then suddenly he went hot and cold all over. Robert's book. Robert's fame. And now—Robert's money. The book and the fame—yes, those he had taken—yes, stolen. But now—Robert's money, too? *Thief! Thief!* The blood rushed to his head. Fame was an intangible thing. Taking it was but stealing a handful of thin air. But this—! the possession of this paper defiled him—counted him in among the ranks of common criminals!

The check dropped to the floor as if it

## THE CHECK

scorched him. He sprang to his feet and stood thinking. Then with a face set like a flint, he stooped for the fluttering scrap of pink, and securing it in his pocket-book, hurried to the bank.

"Robert Dunbar has an account here, I believe," he said to the cashier in his most business-like and formal tone. "Will you please enter this check to his credit."

Every one knew Geoffrey at the bank, of course, as elsewhere. The cashier scanned the check with interest, recognizing the publishers' name upon it.

"Two thousand dollars already for his book! Doane will make another fortune out of it!" he thought, lifting his meagrely-furnished eyebrows with a momentary feeling of envy. How unfairly true it was that to him who hath shall be given! Oh for that ready pen that so lightly earned these disproportionate rewards! "To Robert Dunbar's credit, did you say?" And he threw Geoffrey a glance of unqualified admira-

## THE LETTER D

tion, keenly appreciating the large-hearted generosity of the transfer.

The glance was to Geoffrey like vitriol in a wound, and the business concluded, he turned sharply on his heel and went out, leaving the man to his mystification. He did not go back to the office. He was completely unnerved. The day of his awakening was come, and already conscience was avenging itself fourfold for the wretched palliatives with which he had silenced it heretofore. Was this agony of self-abhorrence to endure for the rest of his life? He should go mad!

As always when in any need, he went straight to the Manor and asked for Constance. The man who opened the door looked his real regret. Geoffrey was a favourite everywhere with the servants.

“There is a ladies’ lunch, sir. It is Miss Slade’s birthday. I could speak to Miss Pruyn, though, and see how soon she will be at liberty. Could you wait, sir?”

## THE CHECK

But Geoffrey was already down the steps. Confound the luncheon! His mother had mentioned it. He had forgotten. Now he could not see Constance for hours. And he must see her—must get relief. This was insufferable. He was going mad.

He went to a boathouse, hired a skiff and rowed down the river as if speeding at a race. The oars dipped and lifted to one constant refrain: Thief! Thief! But there was no one to hear. He had the river to himself. The Tioga was a play-day, sunny-hour thing. On cold, bleak, wretched, horrible days like this the people had their merry-makings elsewhere, and it was left undisturbed to its cheerlessness, and to men like him who fled their kind.

It was a relief to get past the houses. Their every window seemed an unsympathetic staring eye. Beyond the town he came upon Tioga Path. That was worse. He rowed its length fiercely. It was there that he had looked temptation in the face and in his heart had yielded.

## THE LETTER D

He rowed miles down the river without once slackening his stroke. All the way the refrain went with him—Thief! Thief! Finally he ran the boat ashore, found a boy to take it home and walked back himself by an inland road, the miserable refrain still keeping step with him. Had he gone mad?

When he reached the Manor again, the guests had left, and Constance was waiting for him alone in the great white and gold drawing-room, dressed to match it in a white broadcloth gown, with creamy lace veiling the white of her throat. As Geoffrey looked into the deep serenity of her eyes his trouble eased a little, leaving him freer to think, and he first became aware of his own dishevelled and roughened appearance, singularly contrasting with his usual irreproachableness in every personal detail.

“I had no business to come to you directly off the road. I am a boor beside you. I am not fit to be in your presence.”

He sighed heavily as he ran his hand through

## THE CHECK

the hair matted on his forehead. He was indeed not fit to be in her presence. The horrible refrain began again, even here, to repeat itself in his ears. He shook himself to be rid of it.

Constance smiled at him.

“Do we recognize each other by our clothes? You are my Prince always, however road-stained.”

She seated herself on a sofa beguilingly set in an alcove by the side of the fireplace, and refusing with a gesture to sit beside her, he stood near, leaning an elbow on the mantelpiece, and looking down at her hungrily, as one foreseeing a famine.

“How you have changed!” he said, with another deep sigh. “You smile oftener than you used to. Your expression is different. The corners of your mouth droop less.”

Her face grew heavenly sweet.

“You are remodelling me. You are my Pygmalion, charming me into life. It is you who make all my happiness.”

## THE LETTER D

“I—or the book?” Geoffrey asked, with a short bitter laugh.

“Ah—that book!” Constance exclaimed. A glow came over her face. “Geoffrey! Let me say it this once! I thought I had asked so much of you. But to have you give me this—prove yourself a master—one of Heaven’s elect—! Do you wonder that I am happy? I know you wrote it for my sake—to please me. But confess this time—you cannot fear I should think it conceit—did you not surprise yourself? Have you not a different estimate of yourself now? Had you guessed that you had genius in you?”

“O my God!” Geoffrey said miserably under his breath.

“Please do not misunderstand me,” Constance said hurriedly. “Do not think because you gave me so much more than I asked that infinitely less would not have contented me. It was not merely the book that I wanted. It was the effort, the perseverance, the will to set yourself



## THE CHECK

a task and force yourself to do it, the proof of character, of stability of purpose—that was most of all what I wanted. It mattered nothing in comparison whether your book were to be a success or not. If it had been unsuccessful—poor—a failure—I should still have considered that you had given me my proof. I should still have redeemed my promise with all my heart. For character is always more than talent—higher than genius. It is the real you back of everything that I love best and admire most. It is what you are, Geoffrey, not what you do, that counts with me.”

“O my God!” Geoffrey said again helplessly, and hid his eyes behind his hand.

The reiterated phrase and the despair in voice and attitude suddenly struck Constance cold. She looked at him with awakened vision.

“What is it, dearest? I have not said anything to hurt you, have I? What is the matter?”

## THE LETTER D

Geoffrey dropped his hand and turned a haggard face toward her.

“Matter? Only that I was mad—only that I have thrown away my life. I thought it was the book that you wanted—a book to bring me fame. I tried my best. I wrote your book. It was done—all but the last chapter. And it was not worth the paper I wrote it on. Then I saw Robert’s. And I could not give you mine, Constance! I gave you all there was in me. The will to work—the perseverance—the effort—I gave you all that. But the book—it was not in me, Constance! I could not make bricks without straw!”

“I don’t understand,” Constance said bewildered. “Bricks without straw?”

“You once said that talent was God-given,” Geoffrey hurried on. “It is. No man can create it in himself even at the bidding of the woman he would die for. It is beating his head against a rock to try for it if God has denied it him. You can never know even in the remotest

## THE CHECK

degree the cruelty of the effort—the misery of the continual failure, the continual disgust with oneself—”

Constance had risen to her feet.

“But what can you mean, dear? What failure? What disgust? There is your book!”

Geoffrey took his elbow from the mantelpiece and straightened himself up before her. His moment was come. Bending his head a little, his bared soul looked through his eyes into hers.

“I did not write that book,” he said deliberately. “It is not my book.”

With the words an extraordinary calm came over him, as if after ceaseless buffetings over bottomless seas he had touched shore and felt himself once more alive and a man. He drew a long sighing breath that was almost relief.

Constance looked at him in terror. “Not your book? Geoffrey, you do not know how strangely you are talking.”

He answered steadily, not taking his eyes from hers.

## THE LETTER D

"I do know. But I know, too, that I cannot deceive you another day and live. The thing is done. It cannot be undone. But at least you must know it. You have got to know it."

"Know what?"

"Robert wrote 'The Requital.' Robert Dunbar."

"Robert Dunbar?"

"Robert. From first to last it is his."

"How can your book be his?" Her eyes were wide and frightened.

"It is not mine."

Constance looked at him incredulously. "You mean that he helped you—wrote it with you?"

"I mean that I did not write a syllable of it."

"*Geoffrey!*"

"It is not mine," Geoffrey repeated slowly. "I burned my book. Robert wrote this before his illness. He left it at the office. He remembered nothing about it afterward. Then I published it."

## THE CHECK

The sentences fell like blows from a hammer, each fatal stroke driving a cruel truth home. Constance grew paler and paler. She looked around her uncertainly as if seeking a way of escape from conviction, her hands clasped tightly against her heart. A triumphant thought reassured her.

“You forget, Geoffrey! You told us that it was yours!”

“I never said so.”

For an instant her eyes flashed; then they softened.

“You would not hide under an equivocation. I know now that you are only playing with me—trying me.” She went to him and put her arms around his neck, bringing her beseeching imploring face close to his. “Geoffrey, do not play with me so ever again. Let there never be anything but perfect truth between us, in the smallest as in the greatest things. If we could not always believe each other implicitly, what foundation could our love rest upon?”

## THE LETTER D

Geoffrey unclasped her hands, and holding them in his moved her a little back from him and looked at her without answering. At that long strange look of his she turned deadly pale, and breaking from him put her hand to her heart. Something died there as belief grew. She staggered into a seat.

"Constance—before God!" Geoffrey said in a suffocated voice, holding up his right arm. "I meant to explain—to set it straight—before the book came out."

Her look broke his heart.

"Before the book came out—yes. But after—after I—" A strangling sob forced its way up and choked her.

"I loved you," Geoffrey replied, with the quiet of despair.

"No!" Constance cried vehemently. "You never loved me!"

"I loved you," Geoffrey repeated hopelessly.

"No! No!" she insisted. "If you had loved me you could not have done this dastardly

## THE CHECK

thing, though it had been to save your life or mine.”

“No woman knows what a man’s love is,” Geoffrey returned. “Life is a little thing—a very little thing—to give for love. I gave all I had to give for it. I gave my soul.”

Constance sat up in her seat straight and still like a marble statue. The whiteness of her gown and the whiteness of her face were one. Her eyes might have been those of the angel with the flaming sword that kept the way of the tree of life.

“I have only my own love to gauge it by,” she said slowly. “But I know that love must inspire the highest and truest that is in me, or it is not love, it is something base, miscalling itself love. Nothing ignoble can come from what is noble. I recognize nothing as love that prompts a dishonest and a cowardly act.”

Geoffrey was whiter even than she. He fell back a step or two, catching his breath with difficulty, and stood at a little distance, looking at

## THE LETTER D

her out of tortured eyes. She slowly rose, drawing her betrothal ring from her finger.

"I will keep your secret," she said in a curiously untuned and broken voice. "It is for you—not me—to right Robert Dunbar. But—take this back."

Geoffrey made no motion toward her, and the ring fell off her palm to the floor and lay glittering between them. His eyes followed her bare hand as her arm sank to her side. For a time they stood so, neither speaking, neither daring to look at the other, the silence palpitating in their ears like passionate heartbroken speech.

"It is just," he said at last. "I stole your love. Take it back. I claim nothing from this moment. But you can never give me back my love. Worthy or unworthy, honest or a thief, my soul is yours. I am yours, for ever and ever and ever." Suddenly going to her he caught her in his arms and strained her to him tightly.

"I love you!" he said fiercely. "I love you! I



## THE CHECK

love you! Were it all to do over again, I should do it. I could not help it. I deceived you because I loved you. I undeceived you because I loved you. Because I loved you beyond all your conception, I sacrificed your love. If I had not loved you so much, you need never have known. I need never have lost you. Constance—*Constance*—” And with her name on his lips like a cry, he was gone.

## CHAPTER XVII

### *THE LEES IN THE CUP*

The Shirt of Nessus is upon me.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

THERE was an unusually happy family dinner that night at Red Roofs. Geoffrey had not returned, but nobody expected him. After the unlooked-for and exciting news in that evening's paper, it was only humanly reasonable to suppose that Constance would detain him at the Manor till all hours discussing it. They had lingered over it interminably themselves at the table, and they were still full of the inexhaustible subject, when, two or three hours later, after the departure of some evening callers, they gathered in the Racket Room to await Geoffrey's coming.

## THE LEES IN THE CUP

"It is past eleven," complained Ruth, with an injured glance at the clock. "He and Constance will have talked it threadbare. There will not be so much as the shred of an exclamation left for us!"

"Maybe he has not heard it yet," suggested Edith. "Who ever looks at a newspaper at the Manor when Geoff is there?"

"True enough. We may be the first to tell him after all. I do adore being a bulletin of good news!"

Nell turned a pirouette by way of giving vent to her superfluous spirits, and ran to kiss her father as he came in from his study.

"Dad dear, it is only a week off, remember! You will order a box the first thing in the morning, won't you? We must have a box, you know. Plain seats will not do us this time."

"Plain seats indeed!" the Judge rejoined laughing, throwing down the book he had brought in with him—as if any one ever pretended to read in the Racket Room!—and re-

## THE LETTER D

signing himself to the joyous chatter. "We must have a box, of course, and a good deep one to hide our indecent conceit in. I should be ashamed to have the audience a witness of it. I trust that you girls managed to preserve some faint semblance of modesty before your visitors this evening."

"Ruth did not!" cried Nell saucily. "She outdid every one in bold bare praise of Geoff and his book. Her modesty has suddenly gone all to pieces like the one hoss shay. She will not live through the play. She must be kept in the background, or she will disgrace us."

"Background? Not I!" declared Ruth stoutly. "I shall label myself 'The Illustrious Author's Sister,' and sit in the frontest seat of all, and borrow Mrs. Quixley's mouth to smile with. Why, Dad, this is the occasion of our lives! I mean to take a trumpet and toot when Geoff is called before the curtain. They will call for him, won't they?" she asked, in sudden anxiety lest this crowning glory be denied.

## THE LEES IN THE CUP

The Judge endeavoured to keep his preposterous satisfaction out of his voice.

“Nothing more likely, my dear. Geoff is the real author. Sims’ work is practically just a flourish of the scissors. His play follows Geoff’s book quite word for word, I understand.”

“If it does, it is bound to be the finest thing ever set on the stage,” Mrs. Doane announced with beatific emphasis.

“O you dear!” Ruth exclaimed, giving her mother a rapturous squeeze. “Now let us all be sensible. Don’t let us clap it evenly right through from beginning to end. Let us show a little discrimination, and reserve something for the star actors. Think of Estrade as Isobel! Oh! Oh!”

“And John Tighe as Mark! Hurrah!” cried Nell ecstatically, with another whirl of her dainty skirts. “If ‘The Requit’ is not being done honour to—!”

“And the first presentation in Geoff’s own city!” supplemented Edith proudly.

## THE LETTER D

"That 'is mere chance—its being Geoff's city," the Judge interposed, anxious to keep the general complacency within some sort of bounds. "Pitman often brings out his plays in the smaller towns first as a test. We have had a number of first nights in Wendover, you know."

"But never such a first night as this will be!" Ruth maintained jubilantly. "Every living being in the place adores Geoff, and his book, too. Wendover will transport itself into the theatre bodily, down to the barbers and boot-blacks, all armed with hands to clap and bouquets to throw."

"How the poor fellow will loathe it!" the mother said, her delighted laugh overflowed with compassion. "He hates everything connected with his book. I am wondering if we can coax him to be present."

There was a chorus of confident rejoinders.

"Oh, Constance will make him go. Constance is Geoff's stage manager!"

"Yes, Constance will make him go. She winds

## THE LEES IN THE CUP

him round her finger as if she were a spool and he a thread."

"Oh, Constance can compass it. She has merely to say—"

"Hark! Isn't that his key?"

For the twentieth time that evening they stopped talking to listen. This time the lock turned. With a soft shout and a rush of satin-slipped feet, the three sisters were simultaneously in the hall.

"Geoff! Geoff!"

The door was slowly opening. At the sound of their voices it shut brusquely from the outside, then was pushed wide in desperation, and a cold blast of air swept past like a ghostly presence, bringing with it one or two fugitive flakes of snow.

"Geoff!" his sisters cried again joyously. "The play, Geoff! Have you heard? Do you know?" And precipitating themselves upon him in an avalanche of kisses and hugs and impetuous little broken sentences, they pulled him

## THE LETTER D

into the large warm friendliness of the hall. Geoffrey shivered as the door closed behind him, shutting him in with this intolerable brightness and rejoicing.

"I heard it in the street. Hours since. Let me go!" he said hoarsely, struggling to unclasp their clinging arms. "Don't keep me! Let me get by!"

But before he could extricate himself and escape to the stairs, his father and mother, unable to keep back their welcome, came hurrying from the inner room. Abandoning hope of flight, Geoffrey staggered up against the wall, setting his lips hard. His hat fell to the floor, exposing his face, seamed and drawn almost past recognition, and at sight of it his father gave an inarticulate ejaculation, and springing forward seized him by the shoulder.

"How is this, Geoffrey! Where have you been?" he demanded sharply.

All in a moment, their happy world was overthrown as by a convulsion of nature. The gay



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laughter and babble died down into a terrified stillness. Hope, youth, joy, were completely crushed out of Geoffrey's face. He looked old and marred, broken under some inexplicable disaster. He stood, swaying slightly, supporting himself with his arms spread out both sides of him, meeting their frightened eyes despairingly, yet defiantly, like a soul at bay.

His father looked at him narrowly, and his first fear vanished.

"Where have you been?" he repeated, but pityingly now.

"I don't know," Geoffrey answered heavily. "In Hell, I think. I have been walking for hours."

His mother ran to him with a cry, but he put her aside almost roughly, and drew away from the wall, stretching his hands out before him to ward them off.

"I don't want pity," he said, his eyes clouding over resentfully. "I want to be alone. Can't you all leave me alone?"

## THE LETTER D

It was the cry of a soul too sick with its pain to clothe itself in disguises. He moved toward the stairs. Stricken to the heart by his look, and respecting his right to whatever balm silence and solitude might bring him, they stood aside and watched him go. If they could not help him in their way, at least they would do their best to help him in what way he chose.

At the foot of the stairs he looked back. Their faces were all turned mutely toward him, in no doubt or question, but only in unutterable love. His mother was crying softly. He paused, then came back to her and took her hand.

“Don’t cry,” he said. “I don’t know what I have been saying. I can’t think straight. But don’t cry. Nothing can alter it. Nothing can alter anything. It is for ever. My life is ruined.—Don’t dare to blame Constance!”

His voice shook with a sudden protective rage

## THE LEES IN THE CUP

as he flung out the last words at them, and a fierce light gleamed for an instant in his eyes, as still holding his mother by the hand, he looked around the startled group, electrified into something like comprehension. Then all the fierceness went out of his face, and throwing his arms about his mother's neck, he dropped his head to her shoulder with a single sob.

*"Mother!"*

The helpless appeal stabbed them through and through, dulling them for the moment to every other thought. Mrs. Doane clasped him to her breast without a word. The tears fell like rain down her cheeks. The Judge turned his head sharply aside, clenching his hands. No one of the sisters spoke or moved. Pity seemed petrified on their faces.

That one outcry was all. Disengaging himself from his mother's embrace, Geoffrey slowly passed through their midst and went upstairs alone, his head sunk on his breast. They stood in the hall below, just as he left them,

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absolutely silent, listening till the ascending footsteps were out of hearing. Then far off they heard the closing of a door, and the faint click of a key.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *A FIRST NIGHT*

Unblemished let me live, or die unknown ;  
O grant me honest fame, or grant me none !

POPE.

It was the night of the initial representation of "The Requital." Never before had so large and animated an audience assembled under the daintily frescoed dome of Wendover's charming little theatre. It was a fortunate chance that had first brought out the play in Geoffrey's city, where its success would have been a foregone conclusion even without its superb fifteenth-century setting and the famous names that graced its leading rôles. Each Wendoverian considered the dramatization of Geoffrey's brilliant book as a personal honour, and no one who could be there was absent on this night of nights.

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Even Miss McIntyre resurrected herself as it were from a gouty grave, and almost before the doors opened, had her chair wheeled in by remonstrant Dr. Thwaite close to the orchestra, where she sat complacently, attired in a scarlet costume and shirred poke bonnet of obsolete elegance, which extremely well set off her cynical, bright-eyed old face, while her ensnared escort sat grimly silent by her side.

But not only Miss McIntyre had dressed for the occasion. This was a gala night of especial significance, and everybody was in that full toilette which implies the magnitude of any expected event.

"I need not have been afraid that we were over dressed," Ruth murmured to her father in the grateful seclusion of the back of the box where they all sat, nervously conscious of the many eyes that sought them out. "Do see the gowns! I had forgotten that we had so many diamonds in Wendover. Miss McIntyre certainly gives colour to these glittering generali-

## A FIRST NIGHT

ties. There comes Mrs. Quixley—how I wish she could clap with her mouth! And those jointed telegraph poles—Mr. Higby and Mr. Hatton—what heavenly big hands! And all the Marstons—if only they are not too superior to applaud!”

The Judge nodded absently, hearing nothing, while Ruth rattled on, anxious to divert his thoughts from the one subject uppermost in their minds. What could have brought about that mysterious rupture between Geoffrey and Constance? Geoffrey’s speechless misery had been unbroken by a word of explanation the week through; nor had any of them seen Constance. Was no reason to be vouchsafed on either side? What were to be the future relations between the two households? Would Miss Alicia come to-night? And Constance, would she be there? Her absence would be equivalent to announcing the broken engagement. Yet if she had ever really loved Geoffrey, how could she stay away?

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A delighted whisper from Mrs. Doane across to her husband caught Ruth's ear.

"My dear! Alicia Slade—and Sara, too! Oh—and Constance!"

Ruth looked eagerly across the house.

In a box on the opposite side, little Miss Alicia, in a brand-new blue *moiré* and her largest sapphires, was smiling at them steadfastly and making exaggeratedly friendly little signals as she took her seat. In the other corner Miss Sara already sat, resplendent in black velvet and rubies, staring at the red-plush stage-curtain with big black proprietary eyes exactly as she stared at the coals of her own fireside. Between her aunts, all in white as usual and very beautiful, sat Constance, rigidly stately and strangely pale, whatever her eyes might have revealed studiously hidden behind dropped lids, her grave cold face an impenetrable white mask.

Miss Alicia was in a subdued flutter of agitation, betrayed by the constant flashing of the superb pendant at her throat. She had been



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dumfounded by the abrupt ending of the romance that was shedding such an exquisite aroma around her life. Was love only a morning-glory, to blossom a few sunshiny hours and close before the middle of the day? She had fancied it a rose, breathing out fragrance to the end of life, and sweet still after death in tender dried-leaf memories. The gentle little lady unexpectedly took a stubborn attitude, refusing to consider the breach as final until fit reasons had been advanced, and maintaining, with that quietly dignified obstinacy useless to combat, that meanwhile she must continue her relations with Red Roofs unaltered.

“You see, Constance, how right we were to insist upon your coming,” she said, with a triumphant glance around the theatre. “Every one is here. It would have been an insult to the Doanes if Sara and I—their lifelong friends and dear Geoffrey’s warmest admirers—had not come, and I could never have invented excuses for your absence.”

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Constance made no reply. It had taken little less than an expressed command on the part of her aunts to induce her to accompany them, and the sense of the inappropriateness of her presence was strong upon her. What could Geoffrey think, supposing her a consenting witness to what should be his bitterest humiliation? And how must his family regard her coming?

For a long time she sat so still that she seemed scarcely to breathe. Finally, yielding to an uncontrollable impulse, she lifted her head and looked across at the Doanes' box. Her eyes met Ruth's, and fell before her sorrowful questioning look. Later she ventured a second glance. There were the Judge's sterling face, Mrs. Doane's, and the three daughters'. Even in that swift glimpse she thought she detected the tremor of anxiety and trouble behind their demure demeanour. Geoffrey was not there.

Her searching glance passed slowly over the pit and around the galleries. Every seat was

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filled, every box taken. Already people were crowding into the circular aisle at the back. What a brilliant throng! What expectant interested faces! But as far as her vision reached, Geoffrey was not among them. Could it be that he had not come? Had he found it impossible to brazen out his lie before them all? Was it shame that kept him away?

It seemed an eternity till the curtain was drawn and the play began. From the first word the audience was absorbed in it body and soul, moved as one by its pathos or its mirth. Constance alone saw nothing. She sat upright and still, her eyes dropped to the hands folded in her lap, a deep red spot burning and fading in either cheek as again and again the ringing applause rose and fell. If Geoffrey were there, how could he endure these transports?

So the characteristics of the man that she had loved were disloyalty, dishonour, treachery, cowardice, hidden under a cloak of infamous love! This was the Geoffrey to whom she had

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given her heart in full measure—a thief, flaunting another's reputation as his own, and wearing his stolen laurels without a blush! Shame tingled through her veins like fire. Would the plaudits never cease—the excitement never end? On one side of her Miss Alicia was laughing and crying by turns, clapping in and out of season with soft little white-gloved palms that made no noise at all. On the other side Miss Sara sat turned voluminously toward the stage, an immense delight fixed upon her large dark face. The Dcanees, their trouble and self-consciousness forgotten, had pressed in a radiant row to the front, the Judge standing up, that he might lean the farther forward. Occasionally Ruth gave a quick glance up at the box immediately over the Slades'. Robert sat there, apparently alone, watching the performance and the audience with increasing appreciation. Now and then, at any stirring scene or unusual demonstration, he glanced down sympathetically at Ruth. How charming she was in that

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pale green stuff! Under this blaze of light her hair had the true Titian shade. And what a mobile speaking face! It was pleasant to exchange an understanding look with her. He was glad that he had come, and not a little surprised at his own keen enjoyment of the evening. He had not in the least intended coming, and indeed had only come to please Geoffrey, who had clung to him closely of late, shunning all other companionship. That was easily explained, however. Robert never asked questions. Oh, if people only realized the comfort that lies in an uninterrogatory silence!

Robert was sharing Geoffrey's box. But there was no sign of pleasure or even of the most ordinary interest to be won from Geoffrey. He sat crouched together in the extreme back of the box, entirely out of sight of the house and never once meeting Robert's eyes, and with such intense suffering depicted on his face that even Robert marvelled at his modesty's taking so violent a form. But understanding his friend's

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desire to escape notice he conscientiously left him to himself, and in growing absorption in the spectacle, ended by forgetting that Geoffrey was there.

The play was certainly magnificent—as magnificent as the book. Naturally, for it was the book. The acting of it was reading the book aloud. Robert's instinct had been true. Geoffrey had conceived a masterpiece. Its dramatization but proved it one. And what an audience! Robert watched it with equal pleasure. The crowd was a mere unit of emotion, one vast heart beating with a common pulse. Wave after wave of delight passed over it, each leaving the enthusiasm at a higher pitch. Something tangibly exhilarating overflowed from the atmosphere, bringing a finer flush to every cheek, a clearer sparkle to every eye, a more dazzling brilliancy to every jewel. It was magnetic! Robert's face glowed. This was a night to remember! Who could have foreseen quite such a triumph as this, even in

## A FIRST NIGHT

Geoffrey's town, with Geoffrey its admitted favourite!

By the time the play drew to a close, the sense of some consummate excitement still to come pervaded the entire house. Robert was carried away by it, and stood up, watching the stage breathlessly. Estrade in her medieval dress and golden wig, and Tighe in his severe scholastic garb, the lesser stars trailing in the wake of these, were bowing and courtesying before the footlights. Now, in response to a call, there stood Sims, small, dapper and incongruously modern, gratefully acknowledging the acclamations that greeted him, and making his proper little speech of thanks in behalf of the company that had so ably seconded his efforts, while dutifully ascribing the play's unparalleled success chiefly to the author of the book, of which he declared himself solely the compiler.

He had barely concluded before there came an impatient call: "Author! Author!"

"Doane! Geoffrey Doane!" cried another.

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Instantly the audience took it up as one, and the air was rent with Geoffrey's name. Back and forth, from pit to gallery and from gallery to pit, it rang and echoed. Constance sank farther back in her seat, deadly pale. The Doanes looked at each other with quivering smiles.

Sims made a sign of delighted assent and vanished. The next instant the door of Geoffrey's box burst violently open and the little man flew in.

"Come, sir!" he cried ecstatically, pouncing upon Geoffrey. "The audience waits!"

To Robert's boundless astonishment, Geoffrey instantly rose without expostulation or appeal. The ordeal would be trying enough for any man, but how incalculably obnoxious to such a publicity-hater as Geoffrey had shown himself to be! Robert could scarcely believe his senses.

"What? You are really going to speak to them?"

Geoffrey lifted his lustreless eyes.



## A FIRST NIGHT

"It is all a part of it. Come with me."

"I! My dear fellow—!"

Geoffrey stopped short in the doorway.

"I will not go down alone. Come as far as the wings."

Yielding to the distress in his face, Robert went with him, a little vexed at finding himself dragged into the very heart of this vortex of excitement, but anxious as to Geoffrey's powers of further endurance. It was well that some friend should be at hand. He looked ill.

As Sims motioned Geoffrey to the front of the stage, the applause shook the house. Men shouted till they were hoarse. Women waved their handkerchiefs and fans and shouted too. The clamour was deafening. This was the true hero of the evening, this the moment that had been awaited as its culminating glory!

Geoffrey had gone forward readily enough—almost too quickly, as if in undue haste to snatch at his laurels. But it was no gratified aspirant to fame who stood before his friends.

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This was not the bright-faced, open-browed, clear-eyed Geoffrey whom all knew. This was some one hardly recognizable, some one gaunt and ashen-white, with set tense lips, who, lifting a face of agonized entreaty extended his hands in a gesture imperatively imploring silence. Before the tumult abated, he began to speak.

“Listen a moment, please—all of you!”

His eyes caught his father’s. O God!

He turned desperately away toward the mass of faces stretching up above him, all beaming with friendliness, all thirsting to show him honour, all far—oh so far!—from any suspicion. Geoffrey tried not to see them, tried to think of nothing but that for which he stood there. How was it that he had meant to say it? He had repeated it over and over to himself the entire evening through. Now the words were gone! The sweat started to his brow. He must say it then as he could—no matter how. *It had to be said.*

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Raising his voice, that at least all might hear, he plunged blindly ahead.

"You called for me. You believe me to be the author of 'The Requital.' I gave you every reason to believe that I was. But I have something to say that I would have said long ago if I had been an honest man. I am not its author. I am here to confess it to you. I did not write a word of the book."

The scandalous truth was out. Space seemed reeling about him. They knew him now for what he was. And from all that crowd not a sound? Why did they not move—speak—cry down a curse? They sat as if paralyzed. Disjointed scraps of the confession he had planned beat distractingly through his brain. Thoughts of his family obtruded themselves maddeningly. Disgrace leered at him like a live thing wherever his eyes turned. Oh, if there were only one who knew—one who understood!

Suddenly, like a light shining in a great darkness, out of that indistinguishable mass a

## THE LETTER D

single slender white figure rose and stood exultantly, the head held high, the nostrils dilated, the lips proudly set, looking down at him with deep blue inspiring eyes. He had not known that she was there. Her look took back his soul and filled it with courage. His words came pouring out.

“The man who wrote ‘The Requital’ brought it to me to read. The book I was writing was to his as a rushlight to the sun. When I read his, I destroyed mine. That night, through an accident, he lost his memory. He remembered nothing. He had forgotten that I had his book. He had forgotten his book. He had forgotten the writing of it. And I—” A spasm crossed Geoffrey’s face, but the deep blue eyes urged him on. “I published his book under the letter D. I allowed my friends to assume that it was mine.”

A low murmur arose all about him like the indrawing of a single breath. It spread, and fell, and died. To Geoffrey his death knell

## A FIRST NIGHT

sounded in it. It was the judgment of the people upon this shameful thing that he had done. In the silence that followed it seemed to him that the ground was opening beneath his feet. But that one figure stood upright still like a tall white flower, and her eyes shone down on him gloriously.

He raised his hands above his head.

“God only knows what I have suffered!” he cried out. “I deserve the worst that you can think of me. I cannot ask you to forgive me. But—” his voice changed and broke—“you were all my friends once—I ask you to make it up to the man I wronged.” With a swift movement he drew Robert forward. “It is Robert Dunbar who wrote ‘The Requital.’ Give him his due.”

There was one of those intense silences in which thought and feeling are strained to the uttermost. Some one gently pushed Robert nearer the front and left him there, dazed and deprecating, only partially understanding.

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Then all at once a mighty cry broke out.

*“Robert Dunbar! Robert Dunbar!”*

In the relief of this lawful vent to their varying emotions, the audience went wild. They were all Geoffrey's friends. But, less intimately, they were Robert's friends, too. What more could they do for Geoffrey now than to make it up, as he had asked, to the man whom he had defrauded?

Over and over again they called Robert's name. Cheer followed upon cheer like the roar of a thundering sea. They beat with their hands and feet, shouting with the full force of their lungs. They stood up upon the seats and hurrahed and hurrahed again. The orchestra waved their instruments in the air. The actors in the rear pressed forward, vociferously uniting in this fury of demonstration. It was a universal delirium.

*“Robert Dunbar! Robert Dunbar!”*

Robert stood, the centre of this pandemonium,

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every eye upon him, every voice directed at him. The shock of it was like a thunder-bolt. He looked around bewildered and frightened, rocking to and fro, then staggered into Geoffrey's arms, half sinking to his knees.

"My God! My God!" he cried in agony, clasping his head with both hands.

The frenzy hushed down all in a moment, as Geoffrey raised him, stricken and colourless, to his feet. They thought him dying. Some rushed forward to offer aid. Judge Doane, white-faced Ruth closely following, was one of the first to reach the stage, and sprang to Robert's side with a look across at Geoffrey such as only a father could have given.

Robert slowly lifted his head with a strange gulping sound. Something like terror passed over his face in two or three quick convulsions as the shock he had sustained broke down the barrier that had shut out his past, and recol-

## THE LETTER D

lection swept back upon him like an intruding tide, filling all the vacant spaces of his mind. As he realized what had happened, he gradually steadied himself on his feet, and putting away the supporting arms stood a moment or two till full knowledge grew in him, his hands pressed against his forehead, his eyes brightening to an extraordinary lustre. He was transfigured. Then, as all watched with bated breath, he dropped his arms to Geoffrey's shoulders.

"Geoff! Geoff!" he cried aloud in an unspeakable joy and wonder. "I remember! I remember! All has come back! You have given me myself!"

There was no more shouting now. The time was too solemn for speech or sound. It was like witnessing the resurrection of a soul. Many of the women were weeping silently, and most of the men's eyes were dim. Those nearest to Robert, almost as glad as he, closed gently in about him. The movement brought poor little shrinking Ruth to his side, quivering in every



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nerve with a sudden divine shame at her presence there. But the look that leaped into his face at sight of her, flooded her heart with a passion of joy that swept every fear aside. He caught at her hand, holding it a second in a clasp that rivetted their past and future together for all time. Then, releasing it, he took Geoffrey by the arm.

"Come!" he said, with a smile as sweet and tender as a woman's.

His shyness overborne by the glory of the moment, he drew Geoffrey impetuously on with him and faced the throng again.

"I thank you all," he said, in a voice thrilled with rapture. "What you have done for me is past your knowing. Cheer once more now for my best and dearest friend."

He cried out Geoffrey's name, and the whole audience uproariously joined in. Geoffrey could not move a hand in reply. He stood speechless, tears openly in his eyes. His heart

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beat as if it must burst. But amid all the friendly faces he saw one only, proud and content, looking steadfastly down at him with radiant forgiving eyes.

THE END.











